

Biggles

SETS A TRAP

CAPTAIN
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FOREWORD

THE purpose of the following notes is to inform the reader, or remind him if he has forgotten, of certain events which should give him a better understanding of The Curse of the Landavilles without having to refer to the history book.

I. BOSWORTH FIELD

There is no period of history from which we turn in more horror and disgust than from the Wars of the Roses. Its ferocious battles, fought on personal quarrels and ambitions, its brutal murders and ruthless executions, the shameless treacheries and utter disregard for human life, trampled any pretence of chivalry into the mire of a slaughter-house, all the more ignoble for the selfish ends for which men fought, father against son, brother against brother, in support of the Houses of York or Lancaster.

The casualties, in proportion to the numbers engaged, were appalling, for no quarter was given by either side and battles were fought out to the bitter end. It has been estimated that in the thirty years' duration of the civil war more than a million men were slain, not including civil massacres and wholesale executions. Among those who died were many thousands of landed gentry, 200 nobles and 12 princes.

This dreadful carnage finally ended with the Battle of Bosworth Field, August 22nd, 1485. On that day fell the brave but ruthless tyrant, Richard III, and with him the Plantagenet line ended. The victor was Henry, Earl of Richmond, the first of the Tudors, afterwards Henry VII. Richard had sat insecurely on the throne, and it is no matter for wonder that when the Earl of Richmond landed at Milford Haven he was supported by partisans of both York and Lancaster, men actuated by horror at Richard's most infamous crime—the murder of his two nephews, the Princes in the Tower.

The armies of Richard and Henry met in the pleasant country three miles south of Market Bosworth in Leicestershire. The vanguard of Richard's army was commanded by the Duke of Norfolk. The king himself, wearing a golden crown, in magnificent armour, on his famous charger "White Surrey", took the centre. The vanguard of the opposing forces was led by the Earl of Oxford.

Treachery, as so often happened, had already decided the day, for even before battle was joined Richard had been abandoned by the forces under Lord Stanley and the Earl of Northumberland.

The two armies closed, fighting as usual hand to hand. Oxford and Norfolk met and at once engaged. After shivering their lances they drew their swords. Norfolk slashed Oxford's arm. Oxford hewed off Norfolk's helmet leaving his head exposed. An instant later it was pierced by an arrow.

In the thick of the fray word was brought to Richard that Henry was a short distance away supported only by a few retainers. With a shout of "Treason" Richard charged, hoping in the fury of his despair to settle the matter there and then. And so the battle might have ended, and the whole course of history been different, had not fresh forces arrived on the scene.

Of all the knights who charged with Richard, only one, Lord Lovell, survived. Richard, as soon as he saw Henry, dug spurs in his horse and fought his way towards him. He unhorsed Sir John Cheyney, and rushing on Sir William Brandon, Henry's standard bearer, cleft his skull and flung the standard to the ground. He was now within reach of Henry, and might have cut him down had not a young squire intervened. At this vital moment there arrived Sir William Stanley and his men at arms. They overpowered Richard, who fell, still fighting furiously, crying, "Treason! Treason! Treason!"

His body, when it was pulled from beneath those who had died with him, was almost unrecognizable from wounds. The crown he had worn, picked up near a hawthorn bush, was placed on the head of the conqueror, who as Henry VII was at once acclaimed king.

The battle is of great historical importance because it marked the end of the feudal system maintained under the Plantagenets and the beginning of a change that was to have tremendous consequences on our social and political life.

2. THE ORIGIN OF INN SIGNS

In the Early and Middle Ages the naming of a tavern was no mere fancy. It had a definite purpose, and through that it is often possible to follow the course of history. The fashion started when knights wore armour and because of the visor the face of the wearer could not be seen. It therefore became necessary, in order that men of the same side did not attack each other, to have some form of recognition. It had to be simple, because few men could read or write. The practice was for a noble to devise a sign—a cognizance, as it was called—which, painted on his shield or surcoat, enabled him at once to be recognized by his supporters. Words were unnecessary and most people soon got to know these symbols.

When travelling a knight would hang his shield outside his lodging to show where he could be found. In course of time these "armorial bearings" were sometimes painted on the inn itself to let it be known that the knight had stayed there, or, in time of civil war, which side was supported by the innkeeper. Sometimes the sign disappeared, but the name of the nobleman remained. Thus we find names like *The Duke of York* public house, *The Norfolk Arms*, *The Red Lion*, etc.

Today, if you see a sign showing a bear holding a pole (*The Bear and Ragged Staff*) you may assume that the Earl of Warwick (Warwick the King-maker) once rested there, perhaps when he was marching to defeat the Yorkist

army at St. Albans. *The Star* was the cognizance of Oxford, whose leadership decided the Battle of Barnet. *The Lion* of Norfolk was conspicuous on Bosworth Field, where Richard III lost his life as well as his crown.

The Sun was the cognizance of the ill-fated House of York. *The White Swan* was the sign of Edward of Lancaster, slain at the Battle of Tewkesbury. Edward IV carried the *White Rose* of York, but after the Battle of Mortimer's Cross he displayed the *Rose* within a *Sun*, from a curious spectacle that preceded the battle when three suns were seen (it is said) in the sky, in conjunction.

The White Hart, with a gold chain round its neck, was the badge of Richard II, murdered at Pontefract castle. Richard III wore a *Rose* supported on one side by a *Bull* and the other side by a *Boar*. *The Boar* became his personal badge. *The Antelope* was the sign of Henry IV; *The Beacon*, Henry V; *The Feathers*, Henry VI.

The Saracen's Head is thought to go back to Richard Lionheart and the Crusades. *The White Horse*, much older, was the standard of the Saxons, but the common pub sign probably came through the House of Hanover. It was the badge of George I when, in 1714, he succeeded to the throne of England.

W.E.J.

CHAPTER I

BIGGLES HAS A VISITOR

“WELL old boy, that’s another job done.” Sergeant Bertie Lissie of the Air Police pushed in the drawer of a metal filing cabinet and strolled over to where Biggles was working at his desk. “Anything else? If so I might as well get on with it. This quiet spell can’t last much longer.”

“With Algy and Ginger on leave we’re lucky it’s lasted as long as it has. I’m glad they’ve had fine weather.” Biggles reached for the intercom telephone which had buzzed. “Bigglesworth here. Yes. Who? All right. Bring him up.”

“Who was that?” inquired Bertie.

“Door duty officer. Says there’s a fellow below asking to see me personally. Claims he knows me. As things are quiet I might as well see him.”

A tap on the door and it was opened by a uniformed constable who ushered in the visitor and retired.

The caller stood before them, hat in hand. He was a well-groomed young man of about twenty, slightly built, with sleek black hair and dark eyes set in a pale face. He looked delicate. His expression was serious. Looking at Biggles with a curious, almost apologetic smile, he said in a tone of voice that revealed a certain social position: “Remember me?”

Biggles stood up and held out a hand. “Yes, I remember you. You’re Leofric Landaville, the lad I ran in some time ago for dangerous flying. If I remember rightly you argued you were only flying a bit low, and I said that came to the same thing. I hope you haven’t been up to any more of that nonsense.”

“I couldn’t. That little affair cost me my ticket.”

“Haven’t you applied for it back?”

“No. I’ve finished flying.”

Biggles shrugged. “Pity about that, but you asked for it. Take a seat. What can I do for you? By the way, this is Sergeant Lissie, one of my staff pilots.”

“I’ve come to ask your advice,” said the visitor, after the introduction, sitting down in the chair Bertie had pulled up for him.

“Is this something to do with aviation?” asked Biggles.

“Nothing whatever.”

Biggles raised his eyebrows. “Then why come to me?”

“Because I have a problem and you’re the only man I know who might listen and take me seriously. You were very decent over that crazy flying of mine and it struck me the other day you were just the sort of man of experience to answer a question which, frankly, will not be easy to explain. Some people would call it ridiculous, but to me it’s anything but a joke.”

“Has this anything to do with the police?” asked Biggles, suspiciously.

“It could be, in the long run. That’s another reason why I’ve come to you. It would be pointless for me to tell my story to the village constable however worthy he might be, and you’re the only officer of senior rank I’ve ever met. If nothing comes of this conversation, should you hear that I had died suddenly in what appeared to be an accident would you be good enough to make sure I wasn’t murdered?”

“Are you expecting to be murdered?”

“As a matter of fact I am. I’ve been expecting it for some time.”

“And who is likely to murder you?”

“That’s just it. I haven’t the remotest idea. Do you remember our conversation when you caught me taking risks in the air? You said if I went on like that it was only a question of time before I killed myself; and I said that was probably the best thing that could happen. You asked me what I meant, but I declined to explain. I’m prepared to do so now in the hope that if I die suddenly you’ll catch the murderer and hang him. You see, things have changed since that conversation. A few months ago, Charles, my elder brother was murdered. The title and estate have therefore passed on to me. Believe me, the last thing I wanted was that accursed title, and the curse that goes with it; but I had to have it. I am now Sir Leofric Landaville, the twenty-first baronet of the line, and I shall probably be the last.”

“That would be a pity, Sir Leofric.”

“Never mind the handle. Just call me Landaville, or better still, Leo; it saves time.”

“As you wish.”

“A family, like everything else, must eventually die of old age, but there is a reason why I’d rather mine didn’t die out with me. I’d like to get married.”

“Is there any reason why you shouldn’t?”

“Yes. I carry The Curse of the Landavilles. Tell me this; would you marry a girl knowing that she would soon be a widow; and if she had a son he’d be murdered, too?”

Biggles frowned. “What is all this talk of murder?”

“It’s a long story. I could explain it more easily at home. Moreover, there you might understand it more readily. I wonder if you’d care to run down to my place with me. I could give you a bite of lunch.”

“Where do you live?”

“Ringlesby Hall, near the village of Ringlesby, in Hampshire. It’s in the New Forest, about eighty-five miles from London. If nothing else I’m sure you’d find my story interesting.”

“But look here. If you have a complaint why don’t you report it to the local police?”

“They would no more know what to do than I know— if, in fact, it’s possible for anyone to do anything.”

“Is this situation one that has recently cropped up?”

“As far as I’m concerned, yes. It has arisen since my brother’s death, and is

complicated by the question of whether or not I should marry.”

“I’m sorry, Leo, but you can’t expect me to be interested in your matrimonial affairs.”

“I’ve told you the circumstances.”

“Do I understand someone is threatening you?”

“No one is threatening me.”

“Then why worry?”

“Because I know that even if I escape The Curse, as surely as night follows day, if I had a child it would be murdered.”

Biggles looked puzzled. “But by whom?”

“I’ve told you I have no idea. I was hoping you might be able to tell me. You’re a detective, so you should be able to work things out. Of course, you wouldn’t be able to do that sitting here; but if you came home with me I could demonstrate more easily the problem with which I’m faced. I can’t promise you much in the way of hospitality but I’ve no doubt my man could produce something cold and a glass of beer.”

“Do you live alone, then?”

“Except for one old man on his last legs; but at least he’s someone I can trust. He’s grown old in our service. I have a car outside. It’s only a vintage Bentley that belonged to my brother, but I think it will get us there. Will you come?”

Biggles hesitated. “I must say you’ve aroused my curiosity, which I suspect was your intention when you came here. I’ll help you if I can, provided you’ll give me an assurance that you’re not taking me on a wild-goose chase, or anything of that sort.”

The visitor smiled bleakly. “Why should I waste your time? You can take my word for it that this is no laughing matter; or you wouldn’t think so if you were in my shoes. Decline my invitation and one day you may remember this conversation, and have it on your conscience that you did nothing.”

“Have you told anyone else about this?”

“Not a soul. It needed all my nerve to come to you.”

“One last question so that I know what I’m doing. Is this a matter as between man and man, or between you as a member of the public and me as a police officer?”

“It could turn out to be either—or both.”

“Fair enough. In that case I’ll come with you. You won’t mind if I bring my sergeant with me? If he follows in my car there would be no need for you to drive me home. We shall have our own transport.”

“That seems a sound idea.”

“All right. I’ll let my chief know I shall be out for a bit then we’ll press on.”

The two cars were soon on their way, Biggles in the old Bentley with its owner and Bertie tracking them in the police car.

After leaving the outskirts of the sprawling metropolis the route taken by

Leo ran through some of the loveliest rural scenery of England, seen at its best perhaps in the weather conditions that prevailed, for it was a perfect early autumn day with the deciduous trees tinged with gold and the green of the bracken already fading to pallid Venetian red and brown. The best came at the end, when the cars cruised between the ancient oaks and beeches that have their roots in history; the New Forest, established for his pleasure by the conquering Norman William 900 years ago, and in the leafy glades of which—as a judgement for his cruelty in evicting the rightful owners of the land, as it was thought—his son and successor, William Rufus, was destined to die from an arrow discharged by an unknown hand.

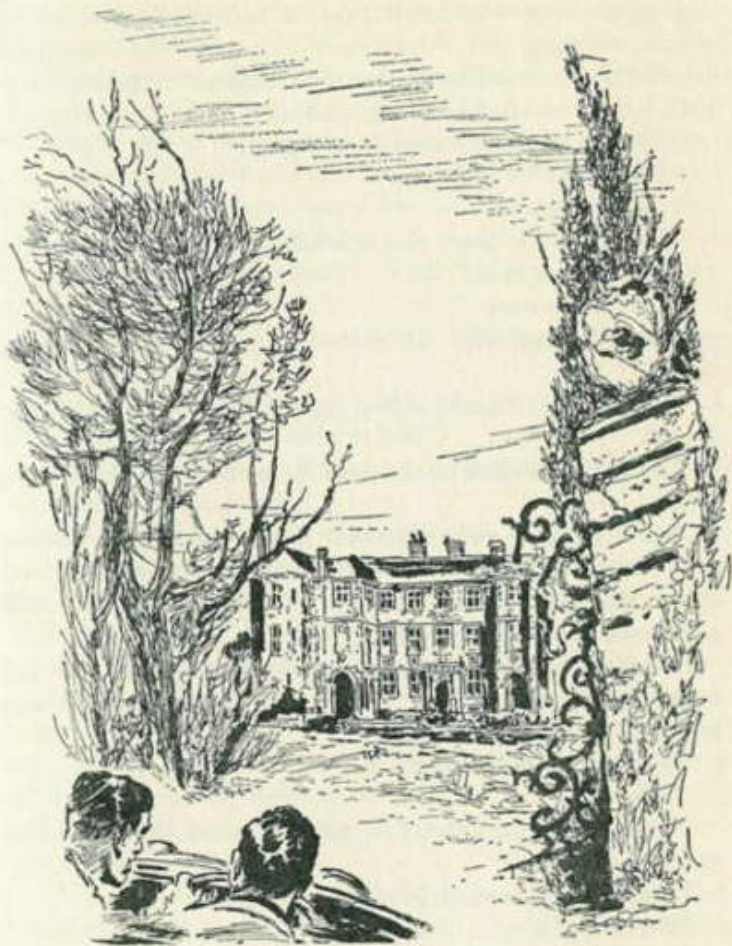
The cars were still deep in the forest when the Bentley slowed, and leaving the road turned off between a pair of pillars, leaning awry and far gone in dilapidation, that obviously once had supported massive iron entrance gates. The rubber tyres now crunched on a rutted track that might once have been gravel but was now much overgrown with grass and trailing briars. There were even places where the sombre holly that forms so much of the undergrowth of the forest had encroached to flourish unchecked, and so turn what had once been a drive into a narrow lane. At one point it skirted a rush-bounded mere of stagnant water from which coots and waterhens looked up to watch the passage of the cars.

However, after that the track ran straight enough for perhaps a quarter of a mile to end at the front aspect of a long stone mansion house of considerable size, grey with age, and, as could presently be seen, fast falling into ruins to make a melancholy picture which numerous jackdaws on the groups of chimney stacks did nothing to relieve.

“Welcome to Ringlesby Hall,” said the owner, without a hint of apology for its condition.

“So this is where you live,” murmured Biggles, in a curious voice, as his eyes surveyed the scene.

“This is my house, and the land you see around you is the park.”



B

Biggles' eyes wandered over a surrounding scene of nature running riot. "And very nice, too," he congratulated. "But—er—forgive me if I appear impertinent— isn't it time you did something about it?"

"There's nothing I can do about it."

“Why not?”

“I’ve no money.”

“You live in a place this size and you’ve no money!”

“That’s how it is.”

“Don’t you care?”

“Not particularly. It suits me, and it’ll last my time.”

“Would you mind pulling up? I’d like to look at the house.”

The car, now close to the front door, bumped slowly to a stop.

Again Biggles’ eyes surveyed the crumbling sandstone pile, now observing the details of gables, windows and other features which, in spite of their condition, still presented a certain proud dignity.

“Surely it’s a pity to let a grand old place like this fall to pieces,” he remarked. “If you can’t keep it up why not sell it to someone who can.”

“I’m not allowed to sell it.”

“Why not?”

“You’ll understand when you’ve heard the story I’m going to tell you.”

“How long has your family lived here?”

“Since 1486.”

Biggles pursed his lips in a soft whistle and did some quick mental arithmetic. “Four hundred and seventy-six years. That’s quite a time. And how many rooms have you in the house?”

“About forty, I believe. I don’t know exactly. I’ve never seen all of them. In fact, it must be years since some of the doors were opened.”

“What about the servants? Don’t they do them out once in a while?”

“There aren’t any servants. I told you, I have one old man who does all that is necessary. He has one room and the kitchen. I use two rooms. The jackdaws, starlings and sparrows can have the rest.”

“What about the land? That should produce an income.”

“A few pounds a year. I let it to a local farmer for grazing sheep.”

Biggles shook his head. “Two of you in a place that size. Why do you live here at all?”

“I have to for most of the year or I lose it. I’ll tell you more about that presently.”

“Who built the house originally?”

“I don’t know. There’s no record, but there’s a local legend that William Rufus had it built as a hunting lodge. They say he spent his last night here. The next morning, while out hunting, somebody bumped him off with a bow and arrow. The body was brought back here before being buried. That’s what they say. I suppose it could be true. In these rural districts folk-lore can have a long memory. Anyway, there it is.”

“Don’t tell me the ghost of Rufus still hangs around,” joked Biggles.

“If it does I’ve never seen it. If we have a ghost at all it takes care to keep well out of sight. I may have heard it although not in the house.”

“Ghosts are usually pretty quiet.”

“We’ll talk about ghosts presently.”

The car crawled forward up the overgrown drive, bumping over ruts, its wheels scraping through weeds and sun dried grass into what long ago may have been a garden. Nor did the weeds stop there. Thistles, nettles and wild flowers had taken possession of everything even to the walls of the house itself. Some had found a roothold in cracks and crannies of the stonework. A clump of pink valerian, the ancestor of which in the distant past may have escaped from a lady’s herb garden, had managed to elevate itself to a window sill, from where it looked down on a party of fading foxgloves.

The old Bentley came to a stop level with a frowning arched doorway. The keystone had once been fashioned as a shield, tilted slightly forward; but the armorial bearings that had been carved on it were no longer recognizable. From the side of the portal a rusty chain hung down from a heavy bell.

The police car parked alongside the Bentley and Bertie joined the others as they got out.

“I’m sorry, but you won’t find any modern conveniences here; no hot and cold laid on, or anything of that sort,” said the owner, dryly. “If you want a bath you’ll find an old one propped up on bricks in the scullery.”

The heavy oak door, black with age, creaked open, and an old man came out. His age would have been a matter for conjecture, but if his face, as wrinkled as a walnut, was anything to go by, he must have seen not fewer than eighty years pass by. He was in his shirt sleeves, showing a faded red and black striped waistcoat. He wore a green baize apron, much stained, tied round his waist, and on his feet, carpet slippers that had seen better days.

“Oh, Falkner. I’ve brought two guests home with me for lunch,” Leo told him. “I hope you’ll be able to manage a bite for us.”

“I’ll do my best, sir.”

“You might put a jug of cider and some glasses out right away. I’m sure my friends could do with some refreshment.”

“Certainly, sir.” The old man retired.

“My general factotum,” explained Leo. “Heaven help me if anything happened to him, as it must one day. He does the lot, from the kitchen garden to my bedroom. He makes the cider, too, and I think you’ll agree it’s pretty good. You might call him the last of the old brigade of household retainers. When his sort go there won’t be any more. He’s as much a part of the establishment as I am. His family has been here as long as mine, possibly longer, judging by his name.”

“Falkner?” queried Bertie.

“It’s one of the old trade names, and some of them go back to Saxon days. Falkner derives from falconer, a man who trained hawks for hawking. He can still do it. He once trained one for us. It was handy to get a partridge or a pigeon for the larder. Saved cartridges. You can still find plenty of these old trade names in the district although few of the owners are doing the same jobs. Some must go back to Roman times. The Fabers, who were iron

workers; Miles were soldiers; Forsters were foresters; Fletchers made arrows; Heywards, the hedge guards; Reeves, the farm workers; the Lorimers, who made brass fittings for harness, and so on. In rural districts of England these names run on, father to son, for centuries, as you can see from the church register. But let's go in and have a drink. I'd better lead the way or you might get lost."

Biggles threw Bertie a peculiar smile as they followed their host across the threshold into the hall, empty except for an old coffer, a strip of coconut matting curling up at the edges, a pair of decrepit antlers on the wall and a suit of armour showing several dents. Leo jerked a thumb at this in passing. "That, you may be interested to know, was worn by my namesake at Bosworth Field; the first holder of the title, and, incidentally, the chap who started all the trouble. We used to have quite a lot of armour, and still have some bits and pieces, as you'll notice; but as complete suits are now worth money to collectors, the good stuff, like everything else of value, has gone to keep the pot boiling. I've managed to keep that one suit for sentimental reasons."

They passed on under a series of Gothic arches into a room so vast and remarkable that Biggles slowed his pace to stare at it. Sunlight filtered in through a range of mullion windows to fall on an enormous oak refectory table, scratched, and in places carved, as if schoolboys had worked on it with knives. Tucked under it, looking dwarfed and ridiculously out of place, were half a dozen cheap kitchen chairs. There was practically no other furniture. A huge fireplace, itself the size of a small room, was piled with logs.

But the outstanding feature was the walls. From end to end they were lined with oil paintings of men in the garments of the period in which they had lived. Some, presumably the earlier ones, wore armour. Conspicuous in most of them was a sword, or a weapon of some sort.

"This is the banqueting hall," remarked Leo casually. He smiled, "Not that we have any banquets these days." He pulled out some chairs. "Sit yourselves down, gentlemen."

"What a room," breathed Biggles. "I imagine if these walls could talk they'd have some tales to tell."

"They would indeed. No doubt many a plot has been hatched here, hence the rose." Leo raised his eyes to the ceiling where, carved on a beam immediately over the table, was a Tudor Rose.

"Ah! I get it," said Biggles. "We're *sub rosa*.¹ Do you mean we're to take it seriously?"

Leo thought for a moment. "I wish you would. That is, I'd be obliged if you'd treat anything I tell you with the strictest confidence."

"Certainly," agreed Biggles, as Falkner came in carrying a tray bearing a jug of cider and glasses. Having put the tray on the table he went out.

"Don't say this is where you usually take your meals?" queried Biggles, looking slightly amused.

"Always," returned Leo, calmly. "Why not? We've always eaten in this

room, although there was a time when it didn't look like this. There's nothing like having plenty of elbow room at the table."

"Well, you've certainly got that," conceded Biggles. "Tell me this. When we were outside you said something about having no modern conveniences. Did you mean that literally?"

"Quite. We've no water laid on. It's drawn by a pump from a well under the kitchen. No gas. No electricity. It's still lamps and candles after dark so at least we're not troubled by mechanical breakdowns. We have plenty of wood so we don't have any coal bills."

"What about the telephone?"

"I manage without one. The village is only three miles away. I run in once a week, in the old car, to do the shopping. To bring electricity here would need a transformer, and the job, so I'm told, would cost five thousand pounds. As far as I'm concerned it might as well be five million." While talking Leo had poured out the cider.

"Good health," said Biggles, raising his glass.

"Thanks. That's a toast that really means something here." Leo went on: "Before we get down to serious business, may I ask, are you superstitious?"

"No."

"Good. Neither am I. Do you believe in coincidence?"

"Up to a point. Why?"

"Because you'll have to believe in one or the other before I've finished talking."

"Suppose we get on with it?" proposed Biggles.

"I think we'd better, or you're likely to be late home," said Leo. "It's a long story, and one you're going to find hard to believe, so I warn you."

"We're in no hurry," answered Biggles. "Go ahead. You've got me really curious."

Leo paused, his sombre eyes inscrutable. "Before I start there's one thing you should know because it may help you to get into the atmosphere of the events I'm going to narrate. You realize that the portraits you see round the walls are those of my ancestors?"

"That is what I had supposed."

"They cover a period of nearly 500 years, from the original holder of the title to my grandfather, and although their clothes change with the fashion of the day, and the family likeness is not always outstanding, they all had one thing in common. I won't waste time asking you to guess what it was. In one word we might call it a particular grief. In almost every case, the eldest son of the men you see here died a violent death. A year ago my brother ran true to the tradition. We call it The Curse. The Curse of the Landavilles."

Silence fell.

¹ *Sub rosa*. In olden days the rose was the symbol of silence, or secrecy. In the days of plots and conspiracies the flower itself might be worn as a sign of faith; but it was also carved,

painted or hung, on ceilings where conspirators met. Such meetings were said to be *sub rosa*—under the rose. When the Roman Catholic religion predominated roses were sometimes placed on the heads of those who came to confess as a guarantee of secrecy.

CHAPTER II

COINCIDENCE — OR WHAT?

“IT isn’t easy to know where to begin, but I think perhaps the best plan would be to start at the first chapter and try to keep things in sequence,” resumed Leo. “Don’t hesitate to interrupt if I fail to make myself clear.

“We now go back to the year 1485, when it so happened that an ancestor of mine was lucky enough to find himself on the winning side at the Battle of Bosworth Field, where, you will remember, Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, founded the Tudor dynasty by pushing Richard III off the throne; and not before it was time, for Richard seems to have been an exceptionally nasty piece of work. At one moment the result of the battle hung in the balance. Richard made for Henry and actually closed with him. He cut down his standard bearer. The folds of the flag wrapped themselves round the head of Henry’s horse causing it to rear and he was thrown. Richard raised his sword for the blow which, had it fallen, would have changed the course of history. Henry would have died, and our kings and queens from that day to this would have been an entirely different set of people.”

“Fascinating to reflect on, but let’s stick to the facts,” interposed Biggles. “The blow didn’t fall.”

“Quite right, the reason being that a humble squire jumped in, parried the blow and fetched Richard a swipe that knocked *him* out of the saddle. Then Sir William Stanley arrived at the spot and it was all over bar the shouting. Richard never again stood on his feet. The name of the squire who saved the day, and so avenged the dastardly murder of Richard’s nephews, the two young Princes in the Tower, was Leofric Landaville.”



"I get the drift," murmured Biggles.

"When things had settled down, and Henry had climbed into the Big Chair

at Westminster, in accordance with the custom of the times he handed out rewards to the people who had helped him to get into it. He also took his revenge on the people who had tried to stop him. One of those was a Lord Simon De Warine. My Lord De Warine, to whom this house belonged at the time, seeing the battle lost skipped across to France from where, wisely, no doubt, he never returned; but his son was caught and of course went to the block.

“As far as Henry was concerned the presents for his followers were easy to come by. He simply dispossessed the people who had fought against him and gave their houses and estates to his supporters. He didn’t forget Leofric Landaville. He knighted him and gave him Ringlesby Hall with 100 acres of land and a pension of 400 a year *in perpetuity*. We’re still here and I still get the pension. In fact, that’s what I live on. I hold the Royal Charter, signed by Henry VII and carrying his Great Seal, and no one, no law of the land, can set it aside, although some people would like to. But what a king gives for services rendered is as secure as anything on this earth can be.”

“Four hundred a year doesn’t sound a lot of money.”

“Not now. But at the time it was awarded it would represent a small fortune. Unfortunately Henry made certain conditions, and I can’t set those aside, either. In that respect the Charter cuts both ways, and while one way works so must the other. Of course, Henry knew what he was doing when he made the award. However grateful kings might be they seldom give away something for nothing.”

“What were these conditions?”

“Actually it was a stipulation to ensure our constant support. He knew what he was doing and he was certainly within his rights. Remember, we’re talking of the days when the Feudal System operated; and that was about the only system that could have worked in the conditions then prevailing. There was a clause in the Charter that while England was at peace the Head of the House of Landaville was compelled to reside here for eleven months of the year, the idea being, of course, so that he would always be on hand with his men-at-arms should his services be needed. Should the rule be broken he would lose everything, money, house and estate.”

“And that still operates today although the need no longer arises?”

“Of course. The Charter must operate in its entirety or not at all. Only in the event of war can I leave the place— to fight for the king or queen, as the case might be.”

“And this rule you say is still effective?”

“Just as much as ever.”

“Now that the original intention no longer applies can’t you get the clause set aside?”

“Not a hope, so the lawyers say. What is written on the Charter must stand to the letter or not at all. As you can see, the house is little more than an empty shell. Through the centuries my ancestors either sold the contents to augment

their incomes, which remained stationary while the price of everything went up, or had their possessions seized. In the civil war of the seventeenth century my ancestor fought for the king, as he was bound to. Like many other cavaliers his silverware went into the melting pot for coinage to pay the troops. When the king lost, Cromwell's roundheads came here, and what they couldn't carry away they smashed. They stabled their horses in this very room and sharpened their swords on the window sills which, being sandstone, were just the job. You can still see the marks outside, as you can see the cuts in this table where they tested their knives, or wiped them after use. The pension was stopped by Cromwell, but at the Restoration Charles II gave it back to us."

Biggles smiled. "But he didn't repair the damage or replace the things you'd lost."

"Not on your life. The pension was paid by the Treasury. The Stuarts were free enough with public money, but if anything meant putting their hands in their own pockets it was a very different cup of tea."

Bertie spoke. "Why do you stay here, anyway? Why don't you clear off and let the whole thing go hang?"

"I've sometimes wondered that myself, but I can't bring myself to do it. It isn't the pension. It may be that my roots are here, too deep in the ground. Moreover, I feel it would be letting them down if I packed up." Leo raised a hand towards the grave faces looking at them from the walls. "I feel if they could stick it, so should I. I don't know quite what it is, but heritage does something to a man. It may not show, but I can feel it in my bones. I wouldn't like to be the first Landaville to run away from anything."

Biggles nodded. "I can understand that. Have you ever thought of selling some of these pictures?"

"Never. That would be too much like selling one's soul, or the dead bodies of one's parents. Being mostly by unknown artists they wouldn't fetch much in the market, anyway. While they hang there I can face them without shame. I couldn't do that if they were in somebody else's house. In order that you should see them was one of the reasons why I asked you to come here, hoping you'd appreciate that, and realize the tragedy of it when I told you that the elder or eldest son of nearly every one of those men was murdered."

"Murdered."

"The alternative is coincidence beyond all imagination."

"Is it always the eldest son?"

"No. The eldest son goes first, but there have been one or two occasions when the second son has gone, too."

"So The Curse might fall on you."

"It might, particularly as that would finish the business, me being the last of the Landavilles. Perhaps one of the most remarkable things about the whole affair is this. There always has been at least one son, and always one with the Christian name of Leofric. There are few cases where a family has run in an unbroken line for centuries. Holders of the title may have had daughters, but

always there have been sons to carry on the name. On the distaff side, that is, the female line, should the woman marry her name would of course be changed to that of her husband, in which case there would be no son of hers named Landaville. But that has never happened. There have been daughters born here, but for nearly 500 years there has always been a Leofric Landaville. Why my father named his first son Charles I don't know. Maybe he thought that by this he would escape The Curse. If that was his idea it failed. For the sake of the tradition, I suppose, he gave his second son, me, the fatal name of Leofric."

"Very odd. You say you've got 100 acres of land. What do you do with it?"

"I let a farmer have it. Actually, being all overgrown there isn't much feed on it except perhaps for sheep, although he does sometimes put a few head of young bullocks on it. He pays me ten pounds a year in cash and the rest in kind—milk, butter, eggs if I'm short, a fowl once in a while and a turkey at Christmas. Falkner has a few chickens in the vegetable garden, but what the farmer lets me have helps to cut down expenses."

"You were speaking of your brother. What happened to him?"

"He was shot. The coroner's jury brought in a verdict of accidental death. Only I knew it was murder. I was prepared for it."

"How? Why?"

"I had heard the raven croak."

"What raven?"

"I don't know. But the croaking of a raven outside has always meant death for the senior male member of the house."

"Always?"

"Always. That's the signal that the time has come for a Landaville."

"Have you ever seen this raven?"

"No. I've never seen a raven, any raven, about the place."

"How very queer."

"There are a lot of queer things about this establishment."

"Was the croaking of this raven the only reason you had for thinking your brother had been murdered?"

"No. I had proof of it—anyway, enough to satisfy me."

"Didn't you say so?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"What was the use? The only result would have been a lot of distasteful publicity."

"Are you expecting me to find the murderer? Is that why you asked me to come here?"

"Certainly not. I'm prepared to let that pass. Nothing can be done about it now. I'm asking for your advice. What would you do if you were in my place? I'm the head of the family. The last survivor. If I marry I may have a

son. Would you ask a girl to marry you with that Sword of Damocles hanging over your head—and hers?”

“Before I answer that let’s be practical. How are you going to support a wife—on nothing a year? You couldn’t very well bring her here, and if you lived anywhere else you wouldn’t even have your 400 a year.”

Leo hesitated. “I see I shall have to take you entirely into my confidence in a matter which is more than somewhat delicate. The lady concerned, who I’ve known all my life, understands my financial position. Circumstances compelled me to explain them to her. She happens to be extremely wealthy. She wants me to overcome my natural reluctance to live on her money in order that she can spend it usefully by having this house and estate put in order. Were it not for the fact that I happen to be in love with her my answer would be no, not in any circumstances. But I am in love with her; she knows it, and accuses me of ruining both our lives for the sake of my silly pride, as she puts it.”

“I see you’re on a spot,” said Biggles quietly. “I take it that were it not for The Curse you’d marry her.”

“Yes.”

“I see. How did your father die?”

“He was killed in the war.”

“So as far as he was concerned there was no question of murder.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that. All I know for certain is that he went to France with the invasion force and never returned. Anything could have happened to him.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that by some uncanny fluke or devilish design every murder through The Curse could be taken to be the result of an accident. One could perhaps cope with plain straightforward murder but not with this.”

“You’re quite sure these murders were not accidents?”

“Certain.”

“Has no one ever been suspected of murder?”

“Not to my knowledge. There’s no record of it.”

“But if what you say is correct it can only mean that a fresh murderer appears with every generation. How do you account for that?”

“I can’t. I’m hoping that’s what you might be able to tell me.”

“Could you be a little more explicit about how these alleged murders happened?” requested Biggles.

“Certainly. Here’s Falkner to lay the table for lunch so it’s a good opportunity. Come over here.” Leo got up and walked to the wall to face the portraits of his ancestors. “These are all Landavilles,” he said, indicating the picture gallery with a wave of his left hand. “I don’t profess to know the history of all of them because there’s little in the way of a written record. Most of what I know, and that’s chiefly about the way they died, has been handed down from father to son by word of mouth. As I happen to be the last

Landaville even that will soon be forgotten.”

“You’re not going to tell me that all these men met violent deaths here, in the house or on the estate!” exclaimed Biggles incredulously.

“Oh, no. But quite a few of them did. One would expect that since they all had to reside here. Take my grandfather, for instance. Here he is. There was no question of accident in his case. It was late evening at this time of the year and he was just sitting down to his dinner when there was a gunshot in the park. He jumped to his feet and said to his wife, who was at the table with him: ‘There are those damn poachers at it again. I’ll put a stop to this.’ Those were the last words he was heard to say. Taking a stick from the hall he went out. He didn’t come back. The next morning, when daylight came, he was found in some bushes with his skull bashed in.”

“Was the murderer never found?”

“No. The police had absolutely nothing to work on. Every known poacher in the district was questioned. Every one had an unbreakable alibi.”

Leo walked on a little way and stopped in front of a picture portraying a handsome young man dressed with all the elegance of the late eighteenth century—blue frock coat with brass buttons, lace at the throat and wrists and a tricorne hat under his arm. “Another Leofric Landaville,” he said, without emotion. “I’m rather like him, don’t you think? He was twenty-one when he died in 1793, and the manner of his death was unusual. He was asked by someone he met to deliver a letter to a lady in Paris who was in great trouble. A lot of people were in trouble there at the time because the Revolution was in full swing. He was betrayed. The letter must have been a deliberate trap because the moment he arrived he was arrested as a spy. The letter he carried confirmed it. It was a plan for helping Countess du Barry to escape from prison. As you will remember she went to the guillotine. Leofric lost his head on the same day. No doubt he was innocent, but that was how he died.” Leo nodded towards another picture in passing. “Another Leofric Landaville. He was twenty-five, just married. Notice the date, 1741.”

“What happened to him?”

“He was shot dead one night as he rode home from Ringlesby village. Apparently by a highwayman. Anyhow the man wore a mask. As far as is known there was no reason for it. He wasn’t carrying any money. He wasn’t asked to ‘stand and deliver’. The ruffian simply shot him at point blank range and rode off.”

“How do you know?”

“One of our servants, actually one of Falkner’s forbears, saw it all. He was riding with him. He galloped on to the Hall to report what had happened.”

Leo walked a little farther and stopped again before a youth in his teens. “Another Leofric Landaville. He was drowned in the lake you may have noticed as we came up the drive. He went fishing. He never came back. His body was found in the lake. It could hardly have been an accident.”

“Why not?”

“Because the water is quite shallow, and in any case he was able to swim.”

Leo passed on to the next portrait, a young man dressed in the colourful clothes of the early eighteenth century. “Yet another Leofric Landaville,” he said calmly. “He was killed in a duel.”

“How did that happen?”

“He went to London to order some wine. While there he went one evening into one of the gaming clubs for which London was at that time famous. There was some trouble over a game of cards. He accused a man of cheating. The man—nobody seemed to know who he was—challenged him to a duel. As a matter of honour Leofric had to accept. The weapons chosen were pistols. Leofric fell dead before he had fired his shot, which isn’t surprising since he had never fired a pistol in his life. His opponent was an expert. Afterwards he disappeared. Another unfortunate accident—if you see what I mean. Here’s another.”

This time Leo stopped before a young man wearing the big white ruff and embroidered tunic of the Tudor era. “He was killed in the tilt-yard at Windsor,” he went on. “Henry VIII, who was taking part, saw it happen. It was a lamentable accident, of course—so they said. It turned out that in some unaccountable manner Leofric’s opponent was handed a sharpened spear instead of the blunt one normally used for jousting. You can imagine what happened. Afterwards, when they looked for the man who had done the spearing he couldn’t be found. Nor did anyone know who he was, for the simple reason no one had seen his face. Both parties had their visors down according to the usual practice. We needn’t go any further. It’s more or less the same story all along the line. I see Falkner is serving the soup. Let’s go back to the table.”

“Lunch is served, sir,” said Falkner.

The meal to which they sat down was as simple as they had been led to expect; some excellent soup, cold beef and pickles, cheese and a jug of beer. It was sufficient. In point of fact Biggles was hardly aware of what he was eating, so engrossed was he in the strange story told by his host. The sinister thread of death by violence that ran through the tale chilled him yet at the same time fascinated him. To unravel the mystery, if in fact there was one, did not, strictly speaking, come within the scope of his official duties. There had been no complaint, no report of murder or any other crime; wherefore it seemed that his position was more that of a consultant than a police officer.

He looked at the man in whose house they were. His pale face with its fine aristocratic features showed no sign of fear or even alarm, although if what he had said was true, and he obviously believed it to be true, he was living in the shadow of death by an unknown hand. Indeed, he appeared to accept his position as a matter of course. There was no anger, no resentment. His attitude was similar to the calm dignity with which men of the Middle Ages went to the block, the stake or the scaffold, for the things in which they believed.

How right Leo had been, pondered Biggles, when he had said that in

Ringlesby Hall he would be aware of that indefinable thing which is usually described as atmosphere. With those unchanging faces looking down from all sides the feeling that crept over him was as if he had dropped off to sleep in the speed and bustle of the modern workaday world to awake in the slow moving pages of the history book. It was a queer sensation.

For a little while he said nothing. He wanted to think.

It was not until the soft-footed Falkner, himself a character out of the past, had cleared the table, leaving them once more alone, that the conversation was resumed.

CHAPTER III

STRANGER THAN FICTION

BIGGLES broke the silence. "I've been thinking," he said. "Tell me this, Leo. These forbears of yours who died sudden deaths. Couldn't they have been warned of their danger?"

"They always were. It has long been a tradition in the family for a father to pass on to his children the story of The Curse; so the eldest son always knew that his expectation of life was short."

"Did your father tell your elder brother?"

"Of course. He told us both at the same time in the little room he used as a study. He had to tell us while we were still rather young because he was going off to the war."

"What did you think of it?"

"Naturally, Charles and I sometimes spoke of it. I suppose the knowledge that we were living under a cloud had some slight psychological effect but we got used to it. I imagine one can get used to anything, even the daily expectation of death. Towards the end of his life—he was then twenty-four—I think the only thing that worried Charles was the problem of marriage." A suspicion of a smile hovered for a moment round Leo's lips. "When he died he left the problem to me with the rest of the inheritance. Naturally, he was anxious to carry on the line, yet he knew that if he had a son he would eventually become a victim of The Curse. He tried to dodge the issue by avoiding women, for which reason he seldom went off the estate. So he never married. He was lucky in that he never met a woman he wanted to marry. With me, as I have told you, the position is different. I've met the girl I want to marry. So, as Shakespeare might say, 'to marry or not to marry, that is the question'."

"How exactly did your brother die?" inquired Biggles.

"He was shot. It happened on the estate within 200 yards of where we're sitting now. He took the twenty-two rifle and went out to knock off something for the pot—hare, rabbit, bird, anything that came along. He often did that. We kept the rifle for that purpose. It helped to keep the larder stocked. I was in the vegetable garden with Falkner, digging some potatoes, when I heard a raven croak. It was the first time I'd heard the sound and I don't mind admitting I went cold all over. A minute or two later, as I stood there wondering what to do, I heard a shot, and an instant later, another. Even then that struck me as odd—"

"Why?"

"Because the rifle is an old single cartridge type, not a repeater, and the two shots coming so close together I wondered how Charles had been able to reload so quickly, even if the first cartridge didn't stick in the breech, as it

often did, the ejector being worn. I felt something was wrong. In fact, I *knew* it. Call it instinct, intuition, anything you like, but I felt it. After all, as sometimes happens with brothers Charles and I were pretty close to each other. I dropped what I was doing and ran in the direction from which the sound of the shots had come.”

“Did you see a raven?”

“No.”

“Did you see anyone?”

“No. That is, not until I saw Charles. I found him lying on the edge of a coppice. He was just expiring. He died in my arms. He’d been shot through the heart. As I knelt beside him he said something, and I’m by no means sure he was really conscious then. He had difficulty in getting the words out. He looked up at me with a most extraordinary look in his eyes, as if he’d seen a revelation, and whispered: ‘Beware the three stars, Leo... the hollow stars.’ He struggled hard to say something else, as if he was groping for another word, but he couldn’t manage it.” For a moment Leo looked moved, as if his self-control was breaking down. Recovering quickly he went on: “The rifle had been fired. The empty shell was still in the breech. The verdict was inevitable. Accidental death. The jury honestly believed that, and in view of the evidence it was the only verdict they could return, unless it was one of suicide, which would have been even further from the truth.”

“What did you think it was?”

“I knew what it was. Murder.”

“Didn’t you dispute the verdict?”

“No. How could I tell a jury of simple country folk the long rigmarole of The Curse? Would they have believed it? They’d have thought I’d got a bee in my bonnet, or a bug in my brain, and advised me to see a doctor. No. Charles was dead. No argument could bring him back so why make a song and dance about it. I let it pass.”

“Knowing The Curse would fall on you?”

“I didn’t think of that at the time.”

“Why were you so sure this was not an accident?”

“Charles was not shot with his own rifle. He was shot by someone who was in that copse waiting for him; someone, therefore, who knew his habits. It was a case of deliberately premeditated murder. I remembered the speed with which he appeared to have reloaded. The truth was, he hadn’t reloaded. It wouldn’t have been possible in the time. He fired at something, and a split second later was struck by the bullet that killed him. If he had reloaded, assuming for a moment that was possible, the spent cartridge case would have been at his feet, or within a yard of him.”

“Did you look for it?”

“Of course I did. I combed every inch of the ground round the spot where he fell. Remember, there were other factors. First, there was the warning croak of the raven, which practically told me what was about to happen. Then

there was the look in his eyes when they looked up into mine. It was a sort of awful understanding, as if a mystery had been revealed. That's the only way I can describe it. I'm sure he knew the truth about The Curse. He tried so hard to tell me what it was, but it was too late. He was too far gone. Then there were his last words, about the three stars—hollow stars."

"Do they suggest anything to you?"

"Not a thing, except that he had seen something and was trying to tell me what it was."

"But if he had seen something surely it must have been his assailant. Why didn't he name him?"

"Obviously because he couldn't. If he saw the man who shot him he didn't, or couldn't, recognize him. The only way he could identify him to me was by mention of those stars."

"Which might mean anything."

"Yes."

"Could Charles have fallen foul of a poacher?"

"I considered that possibility but dismissed it because I couldn't see how it could hook up with The Curse, with the raven, or Charles' last words. I can't make sense of this raven. I've never seen one about here, yet how is it one is always heard when death is about to strike? To suggest that the only time a raven arrives in the vicinity is when a member of my family is about to die is stretching coincidence too far, anyway, for my credulity. Yet the alternative is it must in some way be associated with The Curse. I can't accept that, either. There was a time when everyone believed in witchcraft, wizardry, black magic, and all that sort of mumbo-jumbo; and there's no doubt some people practised it. But surely not now. Even if the black arts, as they were called, were practised here in the Middle Ages, their effects, if any, could hardly have survived to this day and age. I think we can forget all that sort of rot."

"Have you any reason to suppose that black magic ever was practised here?" asked Biggles. "I'm not putting that forward as a theory," he added quickly, "but merely as a matter of curiosity."

Leo looked a little uncomfortable. "It's hardly worth repeating, and I certainly wouldn't take it seriously, but as a matter of fact there is an old family legend about how The Curse came to be laid on the house."

"We might as well hear it."

"Never having paid any attention to it I'm not entirely sure of the details, but here it is for what it's worth. The story is that not long after the Landavilles took over Ringlesby Hall, the previous owners having been dispossessed by Henry VII, a man arrived here with a letter for Sir Leofric Landaville. The man was a queer-looking individual—such people always are—in the garb of a monk. Having delivered the letter into the hands of Sir Leofric the monkish postman miraculously disappeared. That again is all in accord with tradition." Leo smiled cynically.

"What was in the letter?"

“Something to the effect that the House of Landaville had had a curse laid on it by bell, book and candle, so that while they remained in occupation here every heir to the estate would be struck down by the Wrath of God. I don’t know the exact wording. I don’t know what my ancestors thought of it—”

“But it doesn’t worry you?” interposed Biggles.

“Not a bit.”

“It seems to have worked.”

“Rubbish! My dear fellow, this is 1961. I’m not prepared to believe that what has happened here was the result of spells and incantations muttered by the light of a full moon over a witch’s brew of toads’ entrails, vipers’ venom and bats’ blood.”

“What happened to this letter?”

“I have no idea.”

“Could it have been kept?”

“It might have been. I’ve never looked for it. There are a lot of musty old documents in the family chest. I know that because we had to take out the Charter to get it photographed when we were claiming abatement of some of the clauses about being compelled to live here, as I told you. I wouldn’t part with the original. That’s the only time I’ve seen the Charter. I couldn’t read it. It’s part in Latin and part in what I imagine to be Norman French. But there are experts at this sort of thing at the Public Record Office who can decipher such stuff.”

“Tell me, Leo; what happens to this place if you don’t get married? I mean, should you die without children. Have you any relatives?”

“As far as I know, not one. If I die without issue, as the lawyers put it, the estate would revert to the Crown.”

“What would the Crown do with it?”

“I’ve never inquired. I imagine the National Trust might take it over as an Historical Monument. If they didn’t I suppose it would come into the market like any other property.”

“To come back to this letter invoking The Curse on the house. Do you happen to know if it was signed by anyone?”

“No. As I say, if we still have it I’ve never seen it.”

“Did your father, or perhaps grandfather, ever refer to it?”

“Not in my hearing. I’d say they felt the same as I do about it. It’s been a sort of skeleton in the cupboard, best forgotten. Would you, if you owned the house, abandon it on account of some trumped-up nonsense concocted nearly 500 years ago?”

“No. I don’t think I would. But if I were in your place I’d take more interest in its medieval associations if only as a matter of curiosity.”

“You’re not saying that you think an old piece of parchment could have any possible connexion with what happened to my brother, and previous members of my family?” Leo looked surprised.

“Of course not. But I’m trying to keep an open mind about the whole

business. If this unpleasant letter is still in existence I'd like to have a look at it. Will you see if you can find it?"

"Why?"

"There's just a possibility that it might reveal a clue as to what's been going on."

"You can look for it yourself if that will give you any satisfaction."

"Very well. I'll do that."

Leo glanced at the window, darkening as the sun sank. "It's a bit late to start on a job like that today. You'll need plenty of daylight. Why not come down tomorrow and stay a day or two instead of running to and fro between here and London? We're not short of rooms. I could get Falkner to fix you up with beds. You could then browse over the contents of the family chest for as long as you liked."

"I'll accept that offer. I'd also like to have a look at the place where your brother died."

"I'll show you the exact spot."

"Good. In that case we'll be getting back to town. You can expect us back tomorrow morning."

They went out, and the police car was soon on its way back to London.

"Well, and what do you make of that?" asked Bertie, when they had turned out of the overgrown drive on to the main road.

"Not much," replied Biggles. "All I can say is, it's the queerest tale I've heard for many a long day. I'm not surprised Leo finds himself bogged down in a mixture of superstition and coincidence."

"You believe these deaths are coincidence?"

"We've either got to accept that, or say as many generations of murderers as there have been Landavilles, have been at work here. That's just as hard, if not harder, to believe. You see what I mean! If these deaths were murders they couldn't have been committed by the same man. To make myself clear, the man who killed Leofric Landaville in the eighteenth century must have been dead for more than 100 years when Charles Landaville was shot in the park. This is going to take some sorting out."

"You intend to have a go at it?"

"Definitely. The thing has got me fascinated. If we're dealing with murder, and Leo is convinced of it, we come up against a brick wall as soon as we ask ourselves the usual first question."

"The motive."

"Exactly. Yet if it's murder there must be one. Where are we going to find it?"

"Where are you going to start looking?"

"That's what I'm going to think about," returned Biggles, succinctly. "The answer must be somewhere, and I shan't sleep o' nights unless I find it."

"Could this be the work of a madman?"

"Oh, have a heart, Bertie. Over the last four and a half centuries some

twenty Landavilles have come to a sticky end. I'm prepared to admit that in every generation over that period there may have been a lunatic panting to murder someone; but why should it always be a Landaville? Tell me that."

"Sorry, old boy, I'm afraid I can't."

"That's what I thought," concluded Biggles.

CHAPTER IV

SO IT WAS MURDER

THE following day dawned with the weather still perfect and the police car was early on its return visit to the New Forest. Naturally, the conversation between Biggles and Bertie was confined almost entirely to the extraordinary tale they had been told by the owner of the ancient manor house of Ringlesby.

"I suppose you've been thinking a lot about it," said Bertie.

"Thinking about it! I couldn't sleep for thinking about it. Such a fantastic story would keep anyone awake."

"Have you made anything of it?"

"No; that is, not much. But one or two points have occurred to me."

"Such as?"

"For one thing, these three stars Charles Landaville spoke about a moment before he died. They must mean something. Yesterday I was inclined to take them literally, but thinking it over I've decided that might be a mistake. He could have used the term in the figurative sense. The words three stars are sometimes used as an adjective to indicate something of exceptional quality. For instance, travel books talk of three star hotels and restaurants. There are various products which are claimed to be three star. Brandy, for instance. We shall have to keep these stars in mind from every possible angle."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. I've given a lot of thought to this alleged murder of Leo's brother. It was done with a point two-two rifle. To kill a person with a rifle of such small calibre suggests to me two things. First, for such a weapon to be effective the range would have to be short. Secondly, the man who used it against Charles must have been a first-class marksman. It's unlikely that a bullet anywhere except in the heart or brain would be fatal. If murder was intended absolute accuracy of aim would have been essential. That means the murderer, if in fact there was one, must have had plenty of confidence in his shooting."

"Which implies ample practice."

"Exactly. It was vital that Charles should be killed on the spot. It would have been no use hitting him in the arm or the leg, for instance, because he might have got back to the house; and had he done that he would have talked. He might have sent for the police."

"Does this mean you're convinced it was murder?"

"By no means. But if it was it should be possible to find the murderer. On the other hand, if by some incredible chance the whole thing is a matter of coincidence we should be wasting our time looking for a murderer. In that case the thing could go on, and nothing we could do would stop it. We can only deal with facts, not fantasies."

"If it is murder it might be a good thing to cruise round the district with our

eyes and ears open.”

“I intend to do that. There’s always a chance that the man who shot Charles, assuming it wasn’t an accident, could be a local with a grudge against him. Of course, the argument against that is, it might happen once; not over and over again. That would bring us back to coincidence, and that I find hard to entertain. There are one or two questions I shall have to ask Leo. A woman comes into the picture, if only in the background. His girl friend. On a job like this one can’t afford to ignore anything, however irrelevant it may seem. How much does the girl know about all this? If she knows all that Leo has told us what does she think of it? Women have a thing called intuition, a sort of sixth sense, which sometimes hits the nail on the head.”

So the conversation continued, with breaks of silence, until the car turned into the drive and bumped its way over the drive to the front of the Hall.

Leo may have been watching for them, for he appeared at a window and called: “Be with you in a minute.”

Biggles, who had stopped at the front door, while he was waiting looked up at the shield that leaned over it. “Somebody seems to have hacked that about,” he remarked. And when Leo came out, now in an old pair of tweed trousers and open-necked shirt, he said, pointing at the shield: “Did that once carry your family crest?”

“I’ve no idea,” replied Leo.

“Has it always been like that?”

“As far as I can remember. Why?”

“It looks to me as if it had been deliberately defaced.”

“That might well be. Cromwell’s troopers may have done it knowing we’d fought on the other side. They may have been dedicated men but they were terrible vandals. They hated anything that looked like a carving and knocked it down. They knocked the heads off the saints in the parish church. As far as this shield is concerned I don’t think it could have been our armorial bearings or some indication would have remained, even if it hadn’t been kept in repair. Our arms, when we used them, were sable, a bend argent with a rose gules stalked vert.”

Biggles smiled. “Would you mind saying that in plain English? I’ve never taken a course of heraldry.”

“A black shield with a silver band across it carrying a red rose with a green stalk. No doubt the rose had something to do with the red rose of Lancaster, Henry VII tracing his descent from that House.”

“Thanks. Not that I’m much the wiser.”

“Have you made anything of my problem?” inquired Leo.

“It’s a bit early to talk about solutions. This is likely to be a slow business. But there are one or two questions I’d like to ask you. They are chiefly concerned with recent events.”

“Go ahead. I’ll give you all the help I can.”

“Had Charles any enemies? Can you think of anyone who had cause to

wish him ill?"

"No one. Charles was a quiet, unassuming chap. He seldom went away. I can't imagine him even having a quarrel with anyone. Had that happened I'm pretty sure he would have mentioned it to me. He never did."

"Do you mind if I ask a more personal question?"

"Not at all."

"This lady you would like to marry. Who is she?"

"Her name's Diana Mortimore. She may look in later. This is the day she goes into the town and she sometimes drops in on the way to see if I want anything."

"So she lives near here?"

"On the next estate, about five miles away. Her father is Sir Joshua Mortimore, the banker, but Diana has money in her own right. It was left to her by her mother."

"Are you actually engaged?"

"No. I've told you why."

"Have you told her what you told us yesterday?"

"You mean—about The Curse?"

"Yes."

"No, I have not. I wouldn't want her to think I'm crazy."

"Good. Then I advise you not to tell her. Does anyone else know about it?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Then keep quiet about it. Don't mention it to a soul. For one thing, if the story leaked out you'd be pestered with newspaper reporters. That's understandable. You can imagine the headlines. We don't want anything like that."

"I certainly do not."

"And don't tell anyone what we're doing here. If anyone should ask just say we're a couple of old friends who happened to look in. I'd rather no one knew what we were really doing."

"I understand."

"Fine. Then let's get on. The first thing I want to be certain of is that your brother was murdered, so let's have a look at the spot where it happened. Have you still got the rifle?"

"Of course."

"Then you might fetch it and we'll take it along with us. You might put one or two cartridges in your pocket although I don't think I shall need them."

Leo went into the house, soon to reappear with the light rifle in his hand, and with him leading the way the party set off across the rough ground heading for a spinney made up of silver birches, firs and one or two Scots pines.

"Tell me," said Biggles as they walked. "Was Charles a good shot?"

"Excellent. He seldom missed anything he shot at. Mind you, he disliked wounding anything so he seldom fired unless he was sure of a kill. The

spinney in front of us used to swarm with rabbits but I'm afraid the myxomatosis has wiped out most of them. Still, there are a few, apparently those that were immune from the disease."

Reaching the objective Leo walked a little way along the fringe and stopped. "This is the place," he said.

"Can you picture the scene exactly as it was when you found Charles lying here?"

"I'm not likely to forget it. I shall see it for as long as I live."

"Could you demonstrate just how he was lying?"

"Certainly, if you think that is really necessary."

"It is, or I wouldn't be asking you to do it. I want to reconstruct everything just as it happened. I know what you believe, and I'm not doubting your sincerity, but unless I can satisfy myself that this was really and truly murder there will always be a doubt in my mind that it could have been an accident. Will you please lie down in the position in which Charles was lying when you arrived?"

Leo arranged his feet, and then, moving like a swimmer in deep water, allowed his body to fall forward.

"Now the rifle."

"Thanks." Biggles considered the position, and having looked up and down, went on: "All right. You can get up."

Leo got to his feet.

Biggles continued. "Now then. Of the two shots you heard fired that day Charles must have fired the first. Obviously he couldn't have fired after he himself had been struck. The question is, what did he shoot at? You say he was a first-class shot, so let us assume he hit what he fired at, because in that case the remains of the creature, which we'll presume was a rabbit, should still be where it died. According to you Charles was lying here, head pointing this way." Biggles pointed. "Because a person struck by a bullet falls forward he must have been facing in this direction when the bullet that hit him was fired. Let's see if there's anything left of the creature he killed. It's a long time since it happened but there may be some remains. Mind where you're putting your feet."

So saying, his eyes on the ground, Biggles started walking very slowly along the edge of the coppice. The others did the same, and they had covered perhaps twenty yards in this way when Leo exclaimed: "Here it is! Or this may have been it." He pointed to the mummified remains of a rabbit, no more than a flat piece of grey fur wrapped round some bones through which the new grass had grown.



“I suppose to find the bullet would be hoping for too much,” said Biggles. “That would depend on where it struck. If it was a soft part of the body like the stomach it would of course go clean through and into the ground; but a

bone might stop it.”

“Charles always fired at the head,” contributed Leo. “He believed in a dead hit or a clean miss. It’s no use shooting a rabbit through the stomach. The beast simply gallops away and dies in its burrow.”

Biggles dropped on his knees, and picking up the skull crunched the small bones to splinters. Slowly he allowed them to trickle through his fingers until only a small object remained. He held it up between a forefinger and thumb, a smile of satisfaction on his face. “Here we are,” he said cheerfully. “We’re doing fine. So Charles fired at a rabbit. As he wouldn’t have had time to fire twice—indeed, we know now there would have been no need for him to do so—the empty case in the rifle must have been the one that held this bullet. That, Leo, explains why you couldn’t find a second case near where Charles fell, although you say you looked for it.”

“I did.”

“Did you look anywhere else?”

“No.”

“Then let’s see if we can find it. If it was ejected it shouldn’t be far away. Being copper it wouldn’t rust. It must still be on top of the ground. Let’s go back to the place where you found Charles.”

They did so.

“Now, Leo,” went on Biggles, “I want you to load the rifle, and standing on the spot, as near as you can judge, where Charles must have stood, fire at the place where we found the rabbit. We might as well do the job thoroughly. When you’ve fired stand perfectly still.”

Leo loaded, raised the rifle, took aim, and fired. He remained motionless.

“This was the moment when somebody fired at Charles,” went on Biggles, studying Leo’s posture. “Knowing where Charles was hit the bullet must have come from that direction. It couldn’t have come from any other because of the trees.” Biggles pointed with an outstretched forefinger. “That’s the line. The person was in the wood, and he couldn’t have been far away. Okay, Leo. That’s all. Now let’s see if we can find the other cartridge case. Be careful not to tread it into the ground.”

Fortunately there was little or no herbage, the ground covering being mostly dead pine needles, so the task, supposing the spent case was there, did not look too difficult. Keeping to the line Biggles had indicated they walked three abreast, finally making two or three trips on their hands and knees. At the end their patience was rewarded, and in a rather curious way. Between the roots of a pine that were showing above ground level Bertie found a half of what had once been a cigarette, the paper brown from long exposure and the remains of a cork tip still clung to it. Biggles examined it thoroughly before putting it in an old envelope in his pocket book. While he was doing this Bertie let out a little cry that promised further success and held up the short, slim copper case of a point twenty-two cartridge.

“Great work,” congratulated Biggles. “So now we know. You were right,

Leo. It was murder. The murderer must have stood behind this tree while he waited for your brother to come close. He must have been a cold-blooded devil. He had the nerve to smoke a cigarette while he waited, dropping it half smoked when he saw Charles coming. This was what I wanted to know."

"Then you're satisfied Charles' death was not an accident?"

"It's hard to see how it could have been. There were two bullets, and from the speed at which they were fired, and the distance between this tree and where Charles must have been standing, it would have been impossible for them to have been fired by the same man. So there were two men, each with a twenty-two bore rifle. We might be able to double check that. Have you ejected the cartridge you fired, Leo?"

"Not yet."

"Then please do so and give the case to me."

Leo obliged.

Biggles took the empty shell, and holding the two caps towards him compared them. "We don't need any more proof than this," he said. "Take a look. The firing pin of that old rifle of yours, Leo, struck the rim of the cap. This last case, the one we picked up here by the tree, was struck dead centre, probably as a result of the rifle being a more modern pattern."

"What do we do now?" asked Leo.

"Now we know Charles was murdered we shall have to try to find the man who murdered him. The scent, of course, is stone cold, but there is still the motive if we can find it. People don't commit murder for no reason at all."

Biggles lit a cigarette and drew on it thoughtfully. "If Charles was the inoffensive chap you say he was, why should anyone want to kill him? The murder must have been deliberate. Let us consider the poacher possibility. The man was here, in the spinney. He'd see Charles walking along the outside. He'd see him shoot the rabbit. Up to that time Charles had certainly not seen him or he wouldn't have gone on after the rabbit. He'd stop and ask the man what he was doing there, with a rifle. Right?"

"Yes, that's reasonable," agreed Leo.

"At this stage the normal behaviour of a poacher would be to stand still or hide, hoping Charles would pick up the rabbit he'd shot and return home. That would leave him free to make his escape. There would be no reason for him to expose himself, let alone shoot Charles dead. Why did he do it? Leo, how long was it between the time you heard the raven croak and your arrival here?"

"Not more than two or three minutes."

"Charles must have heard it."

"I don't see how he could fail to hear it."

"And he'd know the significance of it."

"Of course."

"What would he do? Or let's put it this way. What would *you* do?"

"I'd look up in the air for sight of the bird."

“And not seeing it?”

“I’d carry on with what I was doing.”

“You wouldn’t run away?”

“Run away? Certainly not. One doesn’t run away from a bird. I’d be more concerned with trying to see it.”

“Yes,” said Biggles softly, as if speaking to himself. “Naturally.” He looked at Leo. “You’d look for it.”

“I would.”

“But you never have seen this bird of ill-omen?”

“Never. If ravens were common here it would be a different matter, but they’re not. The only ravens I’ve ever seen are those at the Tower of London, where the ugly brutes strut about on the spot where the executions took place. Some people suppose it was the blood of the people who had had their heads chopped off which took them there in the first instance. What are you getting at?”

“I’m wondering if there ever was a bird here.”

“I heard it.”

“But you didn’t see it. You only heard it croak. It isn’t difficult to imitate a raven. The sound might have been made by a man who was standing here in the spinney. The man who shot Charles. If so, it seems that he must have known something about The Curse.”

“That’s a possibility that has never occurred to me.”

“All right, let’s agree that you heard a raven. It doesn’t really matter whether it was genuine or a fake. The significant fact is that you heard it, and Charles must have heard it. You say that had you been in Charles’ position you’d have looked for it. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that Charles would look up in the hope of seeing it.”

“Well?”

“The intention of that croak may have been no more than to intimidate anyone who heard it—I mean anyone who knew the sinister meaning of the sound. To such a person it would come as a shock. Upset his nerves. But it now occurs to me that it might also have had a more practical purpose.”

“And what’s that?”

“The sound might have been a decoy to entice the victim to a spot where the murderer was waiting for him with a rifle.”

“Could be,” agreed Leo.

“As you ran towards the spinney did you see anyone— repeat, *anyone*?”

“Not a soul.”

“Did you look?”

“Frankly, no. I may have glanced around, but nothing more. I was too taken up with Charles.”

“Naturally.”

“When I found him I was half stunned with shock. It took me a minute to get over it. I hardly knew what I was doing, but instinctively, I suppose, I ran

back to the house for Falkner to help me.”

“You found him in the house?”

“Yes.”

“During this period the murderer would have ample opportunity to get clean away.”

“No doubt. The last thing I was thinking of then was the murderer.”

Biggles nodded. “I can understand that. Next time you hear a raven croak, Leo, you’d be well advised to go the other way. Look, but don’t go near.” He dropped his cigarette and put a foot on it. “While we’re out here I might as well have a look round your ground.”

“For any particular reason? There’s nothing to see.”

“I had in mind a spot of birds’ nesting.”

“Birds’ nesting!”

“To see if there’s anything about that might suggest a raven’s nest.”

“Are you fooling?”

“Certainly not.”

“All right. Look around by all means but there’s nothing to see except a lot of rough stuff. The park, if we can call it that, is practically square. On three sides it’s bounded by farm land or forest. The only road anywhere near is the one that runs right across the south side. That’s the one by which we came here. There’s no fence but there’s a good thick-set hedge with a wide grass verge on the other side. The only way in is through the gap where the entrance gates used to be.”

“No matter. I always like to get my bearings.”

“Just as you like.”

They did a slow tour of the grounds, but as Leo had said there was little to see, and nothing of interest, wherefore they made their way back to the house.

“Are you going to stay the night?” asked Leo, as they walked towards it.

“We mustn’t trespass too much on your hospitality,” returned Biggles.

“Let’s leave that for the moment. I’ll decide later. Meanwhile I could do with another glass of your excellent cider.”

¹ According to legend the ravens came to the Tower in 1078 from the (then) surrounding woods, because there was no sanitation and scraps of food could be picked up in the gutters. In the reign of Charles II a rumour started to the effect that when there were no ravens in the Tower the British Empire would collapse. Since then each bird has a wing clipped to prevent it from flying away. They are allowed to roam about as they wish, but they can only hop about the greens, often on the site of the execution block. Their favourite food is meat.

CHAPTER V

THE OLD OAK CHEST

THEY had just reached the house when a car came up the drive to arrive a moment later.

"Here's Diana," said Leo, turning towards it as the sole occupant got out. This was an attractive young woman of about twenty, wearing a tweed suit as for the country. Fair, with flaxen hair, blue eyes and a flawless skin showing no sign of make-up, she was obviously the "open air" type.

Leo introduced his companions without mentioning their police ranks. This done, to Diana he said: "You're later than usual."

She answered: "Between the village and the Spurs I was held up by a flock of sheep. Couldn't get past. Now I must hurry. Do you want anything today?"

"No thanks."

"Then I'll push right along."

"Care for a drink?"

"No thanks, Leo. I won't stop now. Are your friends staying with you?"

"Possibly, for a day or two, if I can persuade them."

"Bring them over to dinner one evening."

"Thanks. That's most kind of you."

"Good-bye, then. Take care of yourself." Diana got back into her car and headed for the main road.

Biggles looked at Leo inquiringly. "What did she mean by take care of yourself?"

Leo shrugged. "I imagine it was only a figure of speech. She knows our reputation for accidents."

"I thought you said you hadn't told her about The Curse."

"Nor have I; but she may have heard some tittle-tattle in the village. You know how country people gossip about local affairs, and although it hasn't come back to me I imagine the locals, the older ones, anyhow, haven't overlooked the Landaville habit of dying with their boots on. I don't think what Diana said was intended to be taken seriously."

"Maybe not, but all the same, if I were you I'd feel inclined to watch my step," returned Biggles seriously.

"How do you suggest I do that—lock myself in the house?" questioned Leo, with mild sarcasm.

"I don't know; but as I told you a moment or two ago, if you hear any ravens croaking I'd let 'em croak. I wouldn't go out to look for them."

Leo looked at Biggles curiously. "Do you really think I'm in immediate danger?"

"Again I can only say I don't know. It could be. After all, as you yourself have pointed out, you're the last of the Landavilles, so if anything should

happen to you the family would become extinct. That might suit some people."

Leo's eyes opened wide. "For heaven's sake! Why? We haven't done anything to anyone. Why should it suit someone to wipe us out?"

Biggles shook his head. "I wouldn't know, but it seems to me that someone has been trying to do just that for quite some time."

"What makes you think so?"

"It's you, not me, who insists that all these sudden deaths were murders. We've just proved the last one was, and that being so the others may have been. We don't know, and we may never know, but it begins to look like a possibility. Let us assume you're right. Can you think of any other reason why these murders should occur unless someone is trying to wipe you out, or frighten you out of the house?"

Leo did not answer.

Biggles dropped into one of the deck chairs Falkner had put out with a small table and a tray of refreshments. He went on: "If these so-called accidents were in fact murders there must have been a purpose behind them; and before they can be stopped we've got to find out what that was, otherwise they could go on while there's a Landaville left alive. In a civilized country there are not many motives for murder. One is financial gain. If you like, call it robbery. Was Charles robbed of anything?"

"No. He owned nothing worth stealing."

"Were any of the others robbed?"

"If they were there's no record of it. I wouldn't really know. They were long before my time."

"Has the house ever been burgled?"

"No." Leo smiled wanly. "There's nothing in it worth stealing."

"Very well. Let's say the motive was not robbery. What else have we? Jealousy? That means a woman in the case. Did Charles ever have any trouble with a woman?"

"Certainly not."

"Okay. Then where do we go from here? If we're correct in supposing that somebody has been bumping off members of your family for years we can only ask ourselves why."

"That's what I'm asking you."

"And that's what I'm trying to find out. I'd feel pretty cheap if you were bumped off while I was working on the case. That's why I'm asking you to be as careful as is reasonably possible."

"I can't spend the rest of my life indoors."

"It wouldn't necessarily save you if you did."

"As far as I know there has never been a murder or a fatal accident inside the house. It has always been outside. How do you account for that?"

"If it happened inside it would be more difficult to make it look like an accident."

“It could be coincidence.”

Biggles shook his head. “We’ll fall back on coincidence when everything else has failed. By the way, Miss Mortimore said something about spurs. What did she mean?”

“The Spurs is simply the name of a pub on the outskirts of the village. Pretty old place. Used to be an old coaching inn. Nice to look at but that’s about all. They don’t do meals.”

Falkner came out. “Shall I serve lunch, sir?”

“Please.”

As Falkner retired Leo turned back to Biggles. “What are you going to do after lunch?”

“I thought we might have a look through your family records to see if we can find anything that might give us a lead. It would be interesting, for instance, to have a look at that letter you told us about, the one that was supposed to lay a curse on you. That’s if it could be found.”

“By all means, but I’m afraid it’ll be a dusty job. Let’s go in and have something to eat.”

They went into the great dining-room where Falkner served another simple but satisfying meal. When it was finished, and Biggles had lighted a cigarette he asked: “By the way, Leo. Where was Charles buried?”

“In the village churchyard. All the Landavilles who died here are buried there. As lords of the manor we have our own plot.”

“How old is the church?”

“Very old. They say it was built in Norman times. Why do you ask?”

“The records there might yield something interesting. That’s where all parish records are kept. Old churches up and down the country have provided a lot of history. It isn’t done so much nowadays, but years ago, apart from births and deaths, the priest in charge often kept a sort of diary, notes on anything unusual that happened in the parish.”

“Somebody once told me that the register here goes back to about 1430.”

“Have you ever seen it?”

“No. I’m afraid it is some time since I was in the church. I haven’t been since Charles’ funeral. In the old days, you know, it was customary to bury important people inside the church, often under the main aisle. It used to give me the creeps to know I was walking over the bones and dust of my early ancestors.”

“I can believe that,” said Biggles. “Forget it. Let’s have a look at any old papers you have.”

“There isn’t much paper. It’s all parchment. Sheepskins, as stiff as a board, so Charles told me. He once tried to read some of them. I doubt if you’ll be able to make out what’s written on them.”

“No matter. Let’s have a look.”

“I’ll fetch the key of the chest.” Leo went off, to return in a minute or two with an enormous iron key, dark in colour and somewhat rusty. “Here we

are,” he said. “Come on.”

The others followed him along a gloomy stone corridor the walls of which were decorated in places with military equipment of another age, pieces of armour, swords, lance heads, and in one place, a mace and a battle-axe, crossed.

“Who did these antiques once belong to?” asked Bertie.

“I haven’t the foggiest idea,” answered Leo. “Some of my warlike forerunners, no doubt. I’m glad we don’t have to clutter ourselves up with that sort of ironmongery.”

“Isn’t it worth anything?”

“Had it been I’d have sold it. It isn’t worth much more than its weight as old iron.”

A short spiral staircase, still of stone, and another short corridor took them into a rather small room completely devoid of furniture except for an enormous oak chest, black with age and bound with massive bands of copper or brass; it was not possible to say which. Two of the bands, towards the ends, were broader than the rest, and the reason for this was apparent. Each carried, a few inches from the top, a ponderous padlock, the arm passing through an iron ring.

“That wasn’t built yesterday,” observed Bertie.

“Nor the day before,” returned Leo as, key in hand, he stooped to use it.

“Just a minute, Leo,” said Biggles, sharply. “Don’t touch it yet.”



Leo looked up, his face registering surprise. "What's the matter?"

"How long is it since this chest was opened?" asked Biggles, stepping closer.

"I can't remember the date. Anyway, not for a long while. The last time was when, as I think I told you, the Charter had to be photographed for the

authorities in support of our claim to have some of the clauses set aside. The Charter was on top, so it wasn't necessary to touch anything else. Why do you ask?"

"Because it looks to me as if it had been interfered with fairly recently. Did you have any difficulty in opening it?"

"I don't think so."

Biggles dropped on a knee and examined one of the locks. "Take a look at this. You can see where a tool of some sort has been used as a lever. You can see where it bit into the metal. Those marks are fresh. They still shine. Moreover, the hasp has been slightly bent."

"You're right. I don't understand it," said Leo.

"You told me you'd never been burgled."

"We haven't."

"I'd say you have." Biggles looked suspiciously in the direction of the wall in which were set two picturesque casement windows with leaded diamond panes.

Leo looked concerned. "I suppose it would be possible for someone to get in. With about 200 windows it's be hard to keep a determined burglar out. I couldn't go round every window every night. It'd be a two or three hours' job, and I doubt if it would be possible to make them secure, anyway. I'm afraid I assumed nobody had ever got into the house for the simple reason there isn't a thing worth stealing. I've no jewellery, and two or three pounds is as much as I ever have in the house at one time. I told you, anything of value was sold long ago."

"What about the Charter? Wouldn't you call that valuable?"

"Yes, but only to me. It would be no use to anyone else. Besides, who except me and Falkner would know the Charter was in the chest?"

"So Falkner knows."

"Of course. Why not. He lives here, and has lived here all his life and his father before him."

"It would be a serious matter for you if you lost the Charter?"

"It could be very serious. If I was asked by the Treasury, or one of the other Government offices, to produce it, and was unable to do so, I might lose everything. It's the only proof of our claim to the estate—and my pension, if it comes to that."

Biggles nodded. "Well, your visitor was unable to get the chest open, because if he had he wouldn't be able to lock it again. To get inside he would have had to break it open, and to do that turned out to be a bit more than he bargained for. When we're finished here you'd better hide that key very carefully. It might be worth considering putting the Charter somewhere else, too."

"How could anyone know the Charter was in here, even if we supposed someone wanted it?"

"It looks to me as if someone has an idea there's something valuable in the

chest, anyway.”

“There’s no money in it.”

“A burglar isn’t to know that. He might not be after money.”

“This is another complication,” muttered Leo.

“Open the chest, and let’s make sure everything is all right inside,” requested Biggles. “This business may be even more complicated than you’ve realized.”

“How?”

“The fact of someone being able to get into the house any time he feels like it. If he knew where your bedroom was there might be an accident inside the house. Do you lock your bedroom door at night?”

“Of course not. Why on earth should I?”

“I’ve just been trying to tell you it might be a good thing from now on. But we’ll talk more about that presently. Get the chest opened.”

Leo turned the locks one after the other, took out the padlocks and lifted the heavy lid, an operation that required the use of both hands. He allowed it to fall back so that the contents were exposed to view. A strange, musty aroma floated up from a pile of yellowish grey material that nearly filled the chest.

“Phew! What a collection,” muttered Biggles.

With great care Leo lifted the top object, a sheet of yellow-tinged parchment, and held it up for them to see. Rectangular in shape it was about two feet deep and half as wide. Almost as stiff as a piece of cardboard, it could be seen that one side was covered with small, beautifully formed writing, each letter clear and distinct. The first letter of each paragraph, of which there were several, was in red ink, illuminated with arabesques and scrolls. Affixed to the document by a broad piece of faded ribbon was a flat piece of lead, the size of half a crown, on which a device had been stamped.

“The Charter,” said Leo. “The seal is that of Henry VII, the first Tudor monarch. That scrawl at the bottom is his signature. Thus did kings reward those who supported their cause.”

Biggles and Bertie looked duly impressed. “Can you read it?” asked Biggles.

“Some of it, with difficulty. It isn’t necessary. We have a version in modern English, a translation you might call it. I believe it was my grandfather who had it done.”

Leo put the relic on one side and lifted out a heavy mass of parchments stitched together down one side.

“What’s all this?” asked Biggles.

“I suppose it could be called a book, but as far as I’m concerned it’s just a bunch of old sheepskins,” answered Leo, casually. “I know what it’s about. They’re old Common Pleas and Judgements, nearly as old as the Charter, covering several years. In other words they’re the records of local court proceedings, crimes, trials and punishments, interesting no doubt to an antiquarian. Apparently some of the early Landavilles were the judges who

tried the cases and pronounced sentence. Somewhat different from today.”

“Have you read them?” asked Bertie.

“No. It would take months of work to put them in modern language. When I was a small boy my father brought along some professor chap, an expert at this sort of thing, who wanted to see them. One item I remember concerned a fellow named Derwen. He was sentenced in his absence to *lupinium caput*.”

“What on earth did that mean?”

“Wolf’s head. There were wolves about in those days, and as is done today with vermin a price was put on their heads. If a man was required by law to give himself up and failed to do so he was declared wolf’s head. That is, he became an outlaw, with the same price on his head as a wolf. Anyone could kill him on sight, anywhere, and by taking his head to the sheriff collect the reward.”

“Well, that was one way of getting rid of crooks,” averred Biggles. “But it doesn’t tell us what we want to know. Carry on, Leo.”

Leo continued to dig into the contents of the chest, taking out parchment after parchment, and after a glance laying it on one side.

“At this rate we shall be here all night,” remarked Biggles.

Leo continued digging into the chest. “I haven’t an idea of what most of this stuff is about,” he confessed. “Some of it, I believe, is old household accounts. They’d make the modern housewife open her eyes. Three hundred years ago one could afford to keep plenty of servants. They didn’t get much in the way of wages, but what they did get went a long way. They were well fed. Beef, mutton and bacon were cheap and plentiful. Strong ale was a penny a gallon and eggs a penny a dozen. Even we could afford to keep twenty or thirty servants in those days. Now I’m down to one, and I’m lucky to have him. Were it not for the fact that his people have worked here for I don’t know how long he wouldn’t be likely to carry on for little more than his keep.”

“I’m afraid we’re wasting our time,” decided Biggles, presently. “You were right, Leo, when you said this stuff wouldn’t help us. We can’t read it.”

As Leo was returning the parchments to the chest Biggles picked up a small document that had fallen from between them. It was a single sheet, folded once, longways. Attached to it was a small piece of faded ribbon. It was covered with dust, and when he blew it off a small crest painted on the outside was exposed. “What’s this?” he asked.

“Looks like a piece of vellum.”

“Vellum being the same material as parchment but of finer quality, I believe.”

“That’s right.”

Biggles opened, or unfolded, the document. There was nothing written on it. Not a word. He turned it over and held it to the light. “Nothing,” he said. “I don’t think there ever was anything on it. I’d say this is simply the case, to serve as an envelope, for something that was inside. A letter, probably. Hence

the piece of tape. That was to tie it in. At least, that's how it looks to me. Pity the whole thing isn't here. As it is it isn't much use to us. What this sheet contained may have held the thing we were looking for."

"The original Curse."

"That's what I was thinking. Whose was this badge, I wonder. It looks like a buckled chevron with some loose gear wheels."

Leo stopped what he was doing to look. "It isn't ours."

"How would you describe it?" inquired Biggles.

"Azure, between three mullets of five points argent, an embattled chevron d'or. In other words, on a blue ground, a castellated gold chevron between three silver mullets."

"I thought a mullet was a fish."

Leo smiled. "So it is, but not in heraldry. As heraldry started in France, or at any rate William the Conqueror and his lot brought it over here with them, the colours and so on were in French, and French they remained. The mullet is supposed to represent the rowel of a spur. Hence we have the hole in the middle. As a matter of detail, if I remember rightly, the number of mullets had something to do with the order of a son in a particular family. Thus, three mullets would be shown on the arms of a third son."

Shaking his head Biggles handed back the document. "I'm getting a bit out of my depth," he admitted. "Just a minute, Leo, before you close the chest. I don't want to appear an alarmist, but if I were you I'd put the Charter somewhere else. There must be plenty of places, not so obvious, where you could hide it."

Leo shrugged off the suggestion. "It's been here close on 500 years without taking any harm so there seems no point in moving it now. If I move it I might forget where I put it, apart from which the mice might get at it. Here, I shall always know where it is."

"Please yourself. It's your property."

Leo put the Charter in the chest. Having closed and locked it he stood up. "Let's go and have a cup of tea," he suggested. "I need a drink to wash the dust out of my mouth. I'll put the key away and join you outside."

Reaching the dining-room he disappeared, leaving the others to make their own way to the chairs outside. Before sitting down Biggles stopped to look pensively at the shield over the door.

"You seem very interested in that thing," remarked Bertie.

"Now the sun is lower and the light falls at a sharp angle one gets just the faintest impression of a shadow where the surface is uneven—that is, where there was a device before it was knocked off."

"What about it?"

Biggles took a cigarette from his case and flicked his lighter. "That's what I was wondering," he replied, inconsequentially, as he dropped into a chair.

Falkner appeared with a tray. "Tea, gentlemen," he said respectfully.

CHAPTER VI

THE RAVEN CROAKS

“You might pour me a cup,” Biggles said to Bertie as Falkner retired. “Leo won’t expect us to wait for him. He was right about going through the old oak chest being a dusty job. From time to time one reads of something interesting turning up in some old country house: now I’ve seen what Leo has packed away here I can understand it.”

“What do you make of this business of someone breaking in?” asked Bertie, as he passed Biggles a cup of tea.

“I don’t know,” answered Biggles, thoughtfully. “It may have nothing whatever to do with Leo’s reason for bringing us here. The man who entered may have been a common thief with no particular object in mind. Seeing the chest he’d naturally try to open it, having visions of finding it full of family plate. Against that someone may have come here looking for the chest. If that’s the right answer I would take it to mean that Leo is in greater danger than he supposes. His chief concern seems to be marriage and the risk of his eldest child being murdered. It doesn’t seem to have struck him that the murderer may not wait for that.”

Bertie frowned. “That’s a bit grim. You really think so?”

“I do, now that I know for certain that Charles’ death was not an accident. He had had his warning.”

“You mean—the raven?”

“Yes. It’s beyond human credulity that the only time this unholy bird is heard, death follows. Don’t ask me to believe that’s coincidence.”

“You don’t think it is a bird.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I have an open mind about it. Either way I can only think it’s someone trying to put the wind up the next person on the list of victims. Apparently Leo hasn’t heard the infernal thing since his brother was murdered. If it should happen that he hears it he’ll have to take more precautions against sudden death than he’s taking at present. Maybe it’s because he was brought up with this curse hanging over him that he treats it less seriously than I do, hearing about it as a stranger.”

“A case of familiarity breeding contempt.”

“You could put it like that.”

“Here’s Leo now,” said Bertie softly.

Leo joined them. “Good. I see you’ve helped yourselves,” he said cheerfully. Having sat down he turned to Biggles. “You look worried.”

“I don’t like this idea of a man being able to break into the house any time it suits him.”

“I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do about that. To bar every window would take a long time and cost a small fortune.”

“Aren’t you afraid of what might happen?”

“Not particularly. I suppose that living the sort of life I’ve had to live here makes one a fatalist. You can’t dodge your destiny. When my time comes I shall die, and not before.”

“That may be a logical argument but I wouldn’t accept it.”

“What would you do? How does one escape from a curse when it operates as well as ours has?”

“Curse! Fiddlesticks! If you’re killed it won’t be by hocus-pocus. It’ll be by a lethal weapon; and I’d take precautions to delay that as long as possible. Which reminds me. You were always convinced that Charles had been murdered, shot by a weapon of the same calibre as the one he carried.”

“Yes. A twenty-two rifle.”

“Not necessarily a rifle. But that isn’t the point I’m trying to make. To carry either pistol or rifle would require a firearms certificate, and they’re checked periodically by the police. After Charles’ death did you make any inquiries about firearm certificates held by local people?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It didn’t occur to me to do so. Not that it would have been much use, anyway. In a rural district like this there might be dozens. How would I know the murderer? He might never have applied for a certificate.”

“I suppose there’s something in that, although the police have their own methods of checking. But let it pass. In your place I’d want to know who was getting into the house.”

“How could I stop him?”

“I didn’t say stop him. For reasons that you’ve explained that would be practically impossible. But there’s no reason why you shouldn’t know when he was entering the house.”

“I don’t feel like sitting up all night and every night waiting for him.”

“That wouldn’t be necessary. We could arrange something. When you’ve finished your tea I’ll show you what I mean. By the way, if your invitation to sleep here still stands I’d like to accept it.”

“You think I need a bodyguard?” Leo looked amused.

Biggles’ expression hardened. “It’s time you took this a little more seriously. A thief has been in your house once and he didn’t get what he came for. That being so, the chances are he’ll come again, better equipped for the job. I’d like to have a look at him.”

“All right. I’d be delighted if you’d stay. I haven’t many friends, and those I have seem to fight shy of the place. It’ll be a change to have someone to talk to.”

“If it comes to that it makes a nice change for me to be able to sit in peace and quiet without breathing petrol vapour or having telephones jangling all day. So we’re both happy. Now, if you’ve finished your tea you can point out the windows of the room we were in just now— the one with the chest. All I

know is, it's on the first floor overlooking the front."

Leo got up. "I'm ready. This way." He walked a short distance and stopped by a straggling rhododendron bush. From near it a wistaria, gnarled and knotted with age, groped its way up to, and around, some of the first floor windows. He pointed. "Those are the ones of the room we were in."

Biggles made a grimace. "It wouldn't need the tricks of a burglar to get inside. It's too easy. By climbing up the wistaria and standing on that cornice it would only be necessary to prise up the lead holding one of the panes, remove the glass, put a hand in and lift the fastener. The glass could be replaced when leaving, showing no sign of having been tampered with unless you were looking for it."

"One could get in any window by the same method," Leo pointed out.

Biggles agreed. "Strange that your burglar should choose the room with the chest in it. Or was it? It could be that he knew the chest was there. At all events, he tried to open it. He failed, but he might do better next time, unless we do something about it. Which is your bedroom, Leo?"

"The one at the end, on the same floor. It has two windows, one facing the front and the other the side. The one Falkner fixed up for you, in case you decided to stay, is this side." Again Leo pointed. "What are you going to do—put some bars across the windows?"

"That's no use. Your night prowler would merely get through another window. We can't bar them all. Bars across the chest room windows would tell him his game had been rumbled. What is needed is a trap, something which will tell us when he's on the job without him being aware of it. That might give us a chance to see him. I think I can fix that."

"Do you think he could be the man who shot Charles?"

"I wouldn't go as far as that—yet. But whoever he is I have a feeling that he has an interest in that chest. I may be wrong. We may be dealing with an ordinary burglar. That's what we've got to find out. Let's see about organizing the trap. I shan't need much—a reel of thread and a few small hooks, nails, or something of that sort."

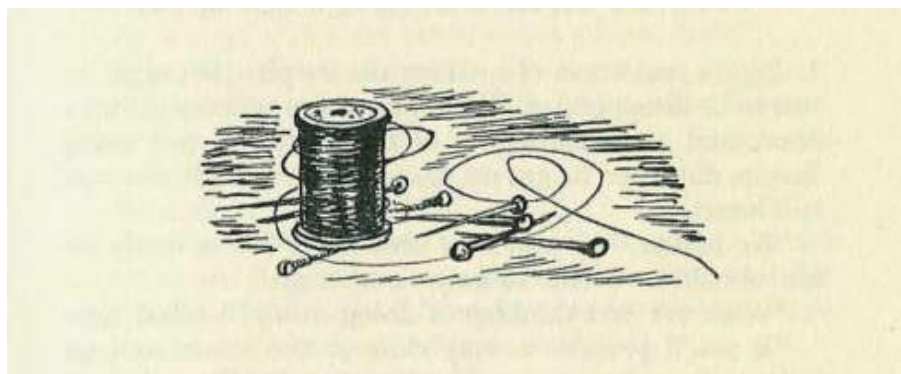
"Is this going to work from the inside or the outside?"

"Inside. Let's go in and see what we can find."

For the next hour the others watched Biggles arrange the trap. There was nothing original about it but it had the merit of serving its purpose. It was simply this. Fastened to two screws, about a foot apart, in the frame on one side of the window, were two threads. These were carried right across the windows, close to and along the wall to the door. From there they continued on along the corridor to the double bedroom that had been prepared for Biggles and Bertie. The two threads were now brought together and from them suspended some books, tested by trial and error to take a strain without breaking the threads.

As Biggles demonstrated at the finish it was impossible for anyone to come in through the window without breaking the threads—of which, of course, the

burglar would be unaware. When this happened the books would fall to the floor, making enough noise to awaken those in the room should they be asleep.



“We’ve no guarantee that the visitor, should he come again, will use the same window; but if he does we shall know about it,” declared Biggles. “Before going to bed I must remember to fetch the torch from our car so that we shall be able to see what we’re doing if the trap is sprung. In fact, I’ll put the car round the back. There’s no sense in advertising there are guests in the house. That’s all for the time being. Let’s leave it at that.”

“If nothing happens what will you do tomorrow?” asked Leo, as they made their way back to the chairs outside the front door.

“I shall probably do a cruise round the district.”

“Looking for anything in particular?”

“No. I may have a look at the churchyard, perhaps inside the church if it’s open.”

“What could you hope to find there?”

“There’s just a chance I might see something that could provide a clue to the origin of The Curse.”

“But I thought you didn’t believe in The Curse.”

“Put it this way. There’s no danger in The Curse itself. Threats never killed anyone. But there’s an old saying there’s no smoke without fire, and like a lot of other old sayings it was based on human experience.”

“But if The Curse can’t hurt what would be the object of it?”

“When I said it couldn’t hurt I meant physically. But it might keep the person cursed, aware of its association with sudden death, in a state of anxiety. What you have to fear is not The Curse but the enemy behind it. You pretend you don’t care two hoots about The Curse but I’d wager you’d feel more comfortable in your mind if it didn’t exist. How often do you think about it?”

“Frequently, I’ll admit.”

“Exactly. You may not acknowledge it but it’s always at your elbow. In

view of what's happened anyone would feel the same."

By this time they were sitting relaxed in the chairs, Biggles smoking the inevitable cigarette.

It was a beautiful evening, the air soft and warm, the autumn sun setting over the trees of the ancient forest. The only sound, apart from the chirping and the occasional song of a bird, was the noise of a motor vehicle passing along the main road. So they lingered for some time, the conversation giving way to a contented silence.

This ended abruptly when from somewhere in the direction of the road there came a sound which, after a split second of shock, shot Biggles out of his chair as if he had been impelled by a spring. It was a harsh, grating croak, unmistakably the cry of a raven.

"Leo, stay where you are! Bertie, take the left flank to the road and try to spot the thing that's making that noise!" Biggles rapped out the words and in a flash was racing towards the road, heading diagonally towards the right. He ran with his eyes as busy as the state of the ground allowed, looking above and around, jumping minor obstacles and swerving round clumps of gorse and briars. When he reached the road he had seen no one, no person, or bird except an odd wood pigeon which jinked when it saw him. Breathing deeply from the sudden exertion he climbed on an old stump, which enabled him to see over the hedge and so survey the road.

Two motor bikes ridden by youths roared past. Then came a car, full to capacity with a family of children. Then, after a brief interval, came a truck, overtaking a woman riding leisurely on horseback along the grass verge. More cars followed, but no pedestrian.

Biggles waited for about twenty minutes, and then, still looking about him and keeping an eye on the air, made his way slowly back to the house. The croak of the raven had not been repeated. Reaching the house he found that Bertie had already returned and was talking to Leo, who looked not in the least perturbed.

"Did you see anything?" Biggles asked Bertie.

"Only cars, motor bikes and a woman on a horse. How about you?"

"That was all I saw," muttered Biggles in a disappointed voice as he resumed his chair.

Said Leo: "This woman you saw. Was she good-looking, dark and about twenty-five—or maybe a little more?"

"That would describe her. She was riding a light chestnut mare. Do you know her?"

"Only by sight. I've seen her about occasionally. She lives in the village with her brother. He runs the pub."

"Really? You surprise me."

"Why?"

"Somehow she didn't look the type to be serving drinks behind a bar. She had something about her ..."

“I didn’t say she serves in the bar. I wouldn’t know. I don’t use the place. All I know is she lives with her brother. At least, that’s what I’ve been told.”

“I see.”

Leo smiled curiously. “Well, now you’ve heard our mysterious croaker what do you make of it?”

“Not much, except it’s a damn queer business.”

“I thought you’d think that.”

“I’m going to do more than think,” asserted Biggles. “I’m going to put a handful of salt on the tail of that precious bird of yours if it takes me the rest of my days.”

“It may catch me before you catch it.”

“We’ll see about that,” growled Biggles.

Falkner came out. “Dinner is served, sir,” he said quietly.

CHAPTER VII

A LADY ASKS SOME QUESTIONS

IF Biggles had hopes of catching the burglar that night he was to be disappointed. The night passed without disturbance, and an examination of the trap, the first thing Biggles did when he got up, showed that the threads were still intact.

“No matter,” he said over breakfast. “We’re ready for him should he decide to have another go.”

“What are you thinking of doing today?” asked Leo.

“If you’ll promise to stay close to the house, and go indoors if you hear any ravens croaking, I’d like to have a look round the district to see who’s about; probably give the village the once over. I have a feeling that the raven we heard last night doesn’t live far away.”

“I shall stay near the house,” promised Leo. “If anyone should know what the croak of a raven means it’s me. I’m not likely to forget what happened to Charles. Are you going to look for anything in particular?”

“No. I intend to have a look round the churchyard. Old churches can be interesting, anyway.”

“That reminds me; we have one in the house here. Actually, of course, it’s a small private chapel. Most big houses had one years ago, often with their own chaplain. In the days of the religious wars they had a hole to hide him in, too.”

Biggles looked up. “Have you got a priest’s hole here?”

“Probably, but I don’t know where it is. There are a lot of rooms I’ve never seen. I can’t remember the last time anyone went up to the attics, where the servants used to live. There’s nothing to go up for.”

Biggles looked at Bertie. “Imagine living in a house with so many rooms that you’ve never seen half of them.” Turning back to Leo he went on:

“Where’s this chapel you mentioned?”

“At the east end of the house on the ground floor.”

“How long since you were in it?”

“I’ve never been in it in my life. Once, when I was a small boy, I looked in from the door. My father was showing it to Charles.”

“See anything of interest?”

“No. It’s a dark, gloomy sort of hole. It must be as old as the house. There’s nothing in it. As I remember it the only furniture was what I imagine must have been a little altar, under a small stained glass window.”

“Can we have a look at it?”

“If I can find the key. I’m not even sure where that is. Falkner may know. I’ll look for it while you’re out.”

“What was the subject of the stained glass window?”

Leo smiled tolerantly. "What a man you are for asking questions."

"That's how I do my job. If I didn't ask, nobody would tell me, so I wouldn't get anywhere."

"Actually, you couldn't see much of the window for dust and cobwebs, but I have a vague recollection of a knight in armour with a halo over his head. Probably a memorial to some noble warrior."

"See if you can find the key." Biggles got up. "Come on, Bertie. We might as well get weaving."

In a few minutes they were on their way, cruising along quietly and looking at anything there was to be seen. The country was typical rural English scenery of the southern counties, stands of old timber alternating with land under cultivation and an occasional farmhouse with its adjacent pastures and grazing cattle. The famous New Forest ponies which sometimes wandered across or stood on the road hoping to be fed by passers-by were a menace; and it was in fact a party of these that led to an incident that turned out to be somewhat embarrassing.

The ponies were walking up the middle of the road taking not the slightest notice of a car honking close behind them as it tried to get past. Biggles, to avoid collision with the animals had to pull up; whereupon the ponies, caught between the two cars so to speak, strolled away into the forest leaving the cars face to face. Biggles recognized the driver of the other. It was Diana Mortimore; and apparently she recognized them, for with a wave of greeting she pulled into the side of the road, stopped and got out.

"Good morning," she called cheerfully. "Lovely day again."

Biggles of course as a matter of courtesy also had to get out, and they all foregathered on the verge.

"You're the friends I saw with Leo Landaville, aren't you?" said the girl.

"That's right."

"Are you staying with him?"

"For a day or two."

"How is he this morning?"

"He's all right. Is there any reason why he shouldn't be?"

Diana hesitated. "That's what I'd like to know. Would you mind if I asked you a rather pointed question?"

"I'll answer it if I can," offered Biggles, cautiously.

"What's the matter with him lately?"

For a moment Biggles looked taken aback, as if unprepared for such a question; as in fact he was. "What do you mean?"

"What's he worried about?"

"Is he worried?" parried Biggles.

"That's the only reason I can find for his behaviour."

"What sort of behaviour?"

"He's becoming more and more of a hermit. He never wants to go anywhere. I have a feeling he's preoccupied with something but he won't tell

me what it is. Do you know?" Diana was disarmingly frank.

Biggles took time to think.

"Is it money?" challenged Diana.

"Well, I think he's pretty hard up. But you must always have known that."

"Yes. But I'm sure there's something else and he won't tell me what it is. I wondered if he had told you."

Biggles was finding this interrogation disconcerting, but faced with a direct question he had to find an answer. "I think he may be finding it a bit lonely at the Hall since Charles died."

"Then why does he stay there?"

"There are reasons why he doesn't want to leave."

"You needn't tell me that. I've realized it for some time. But he seems lately to have really stuck his toes in and nothing will get him out. Why? That's what I want to know."

Biggles resorted to the old trick of questioning the questioner. "You're fond of Leo, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Would it be impertinent of me to go a step further and suggest you're in love with him?"

"I'd marry him if he asked me. He knows that. I wouldn't say it were it not that I have reason to believe he's fond of me, too."

"I can assure you that he is."

"Then what's the matter? If something has come between us why doesn't he say what it is? It's a shame to let that lovely old place go to rack and ruin. Nothing would please me more than to have it restored. I have more money than I know how to spend, so why not?"

"Leo's worry is not entirely a matter of money, although, naturally, he doesn't like the idea of spending yours."

"That's nonsense, and I've told him so. If it isn't money, what is troubling him? Do you know?"

Biggles could only tell the truth. "I have an idea, but you mustn't ask me to repeat what he told me in confidence."

"You men," said Diana coldly. "How you stick together. At least tell me this. Is it another woman?"

Biggles' surprise was genuine. "What other woman?"

"Julia Warren."

Biggles shook his head. "This is the first time I've heard that name. Leo has never mentioned it to me. Who is this lady?"

"Her brother keeps the public house just as you come to the village."

"I can't imagine what put such an idea in your head," said Biggles, looking a little uncomfortable. He regarded Diana shrewdly. "Had you any reason for bringing up her name?"

"She keeps a horse, and I've noticed she does most of her riding in the direction of the Hall. It's said she's interested in photography, but although

she carries what looks like a camera case over her shoulder I've never seen her taking a picture. I was beginning to wonder why she so often took the road to the Hall."

"Then you needn't wonder any longer," asserted Biggles. "You can take it from me that Leo hasn't the slightest interest in this lady. He has never spoken to her."

"How do you know?"

"He told me so."

"Then you have discussed her?"

"We most certainly have not."

"Then how did her name come up?"

"Her name has never been mentioned. If you're talking about a dark, striking-looking woman who rides a light chestnut mare, I happened to see her on the road yesterday. It was near the Hall. As a matter of curiosity I asked Leo who she was, and he rather surprised me by saying her brother kept the village pub. He didn't mention her name. It was obvious he wasn't interested. When I asked him if he knew her he said only by sight. I'm quite sure he meant that."

Diana took a deep breath that may have been relief. "Thanks," she said. "I'm glad to hear it. I wouldn't trust that woman a yard."

"Why not?"

Diana's lips curled cynically. "A woman always knows," she replied, enigmatically. "But I must get on. You can tell Leo you've seen me but I'd rather you didn't tell him what we've been talking about. I have some pride, too. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

Diana got back into her car and drove off.

Biggles took out his cigarette case. "Stiffen the crows! Heaven preserve me from jealous women."

"You think she's jealous?" asked Bertie.

"That's how it struck me. That was why she stopped. She was fishing for information—and how!"

"I thought you were finding the conversation a bit difficult."

"It was more than that. I wasn't expecting anything like the questions she fired at me. They took some dodging. She's in love with Leo. She senses there's something wrong and naturally wants to know what it is. Well, it isn't for me to tell her. That's up to Leo. I wonder what gave her the idea that he might be making a pass at this woman from the pub. Or put it the other way round; that she might have her eye on him. Just female instinct, I suppose. But let's get along."

As they drove on Biggles said thoughtfully: "I think it would be a good idea if those two got married pretty soon, before there's any more misunderstanding. It would be a pity if they quarrelled."

"Would you advise Leo to tell Diana the truth?"

"I don't see why not. She's an intelligent girl. She would at least know the facts and what she did would be up to her. If I'm any judge I'd say she'd take the risk."

"And as she has plenty of money there would be no need for them to live at the Hall. They could go anywhere."

"I think you're wrong there. Leo wouldn't leave the Hall. That would be too much like running away. He isn't the runaway sort. This pub we're coming to on the left must be the one we've heard about." Biggles read the sign. "The Spurs. That's it."

Standing a little way back from the road with a wide gravel pull-in across the front, the tavern, a genuine old black and white house with a thatched roof and window boxes gay with flowers, made an attractive picture. It was obviously very well kept, the paintwork immaculate. The usual old conker tree, the original purpose of which was to provide shade for horses having a drink at the stone trough near the trunk, was still there. Hitched by reins to an iron ring was the chestnut mare belonging to the proprietor's sister.

"Very nice too," observed Bertie. "It would only need a coach-and-four to make it perfect. With a little snow on the ground you'd have a bonny Christmas card."

Biggles did not stop, but ran on through the village, a single street of old houses with bricks mellowed by the hand of time, towards where, on a slight eminence, rose the square Norman tower of the church. A lich-gate, with seats to provide rest for weary travellers, marked the entrance to the churchyard. The car ran to a stop in front of it.

"Let's see if we can find inspiration here," said Biggles, switching off and getting out.

They strolled up the path towards the church between rows of tombstones that marked the last resting places of many generations of village folk. The churchyard was not very well kept, the grass uncut, yew trees overgrown and many of the monuments leaning awry. Not that it mattered, for more often than not the inscriptions, cut in soft local sandstone, had so crumbled as to be illegible.

Biggles made for a corner where in a plot fenced off by iron rails there stood a line of more imposing tombs, raised above ground level and themselves protected by the iron spikes that were necessary in the days of body snatchers.

"So this is where the Landavilles buried their dead," said Biggles, sombrely, as he read the inscriptions.

"I'm not surprised Leo doesn't come here," remarked Bertie. "These places give me the creeps. What must it be like to look at the graves of centuries of ancestors knowing that yours will be the next in the line?"

"Would you mind?" pleaded Biggles. "Why harp on it? All the same, I'll admit it must be pretty grim, particularly when you're expecting to be murdered any day. Here's Charles' grave," he concluded, looking at a

comparatively new headstone.

“I can understand how Leo feels,” murmured Bertie. “This sort of thing brings it home.”

Biggles wandered about for some time reading names, dates and epitaphs, but what he thought he did not say. Eventually they walked together back to the path that ran from the church to the gate. Coming in was a man of advanced years in the black garb of a priest. However, he greeted them courteously, wishing them good day and remarking on the fine weather.

“We’ve just been having a look round, sir,” explained Biggles.

“I’m the vicar,” was the reply. “Were you looking for anything in particular. If so I may be able to help you.”

“Not really. The Landaville family seem to have been here for a long time.”

“Almost as long as the church itself. For centuries they have been lords of the manor. Some of the early ones were buried inside the church, a not very happy practice that has been abandoned, I’m pleased to say. We have tombs going back to the fourteenth century. There are also some interesting memorial brasses on the walls. Perhaps you would like to see them?”

“I would, very much, thank you.”

Turning, they walked slowly back to the church, the vicar remarking sadly that it was no longer possible to keep the churchyard as it should be kept now that the old families who regarded it as a duty were dying out.

CHAPTER VIII

A GLIMMER OF DAYLIGHT

BIGGLES and Bertie, with their reverend escort inside the church, continued walking slowly down the main aisle on slabs of stone worn smooth by many generations of worshippers. Only half obliterated inscriptions revealed that they were the tombs of long dead residents of the district. Those of the Landavilles occurred nearer to the chancel, and in the floor of the chancel itself. There Biggles stopped to look at a stone in a fair state of preservation. The name on it he read aloud. It was Geoffrey De Warine.

"The De Warines were the big landowners in the very early days," said the vicar.

"Before the Landavilles?"

"Yes. I believe they were here from the thirteenth century to the fifteenth."

"Do you know anything about them?"

"Not very much. There are a few notes about them written in the register by one of the incumbents of the period; but they are not easy to read, and I must confess that I have not given them a great deal of study. I don't think there is anything of great interest, historical or otherwise. Few of them died at home; most of them in battle, some on the Crusades." The vicar turned and pointed to an engraved brass plate on the wall. It showed a young man kneeling in an attitude of prayer by a block beside which stood a man with an axe. "There's a tragic story of one of them," he went on. "That unfortunate young man, Simon De Warine as you can see from the name plate, was beheaded. That was in 1485, during the reign of Henry VII."

"Was he buried here?"

"No. I suppose he would be executed at the Tower of London. What you see is a memorial, put up no doubt by some member of the family. It shows the date."

"The year of the Battle of Bosworth Field."

"Was it? I'm afraid my history is not very good. The execution may have had something to do with that."

"I'd say that's more than likely," agreed Biggles softly. "Quite a few heads were being lopped off about that time. It was the penalty you paid for fighting on the losing side."

The vicar continued. "The brass next to it, showing a knight with his shield at rest, commemorates another member of the same noble family, which, I have heard it said, came to this country with William the Conqueror. William, of course, after the Battle of Hastings, took most of the land from the Saxons and parcelled it out to the barons who had supported him."

Biggles studied the quaintly engraved plate. "The device on the shield would be the knight's coat of arms, I imagine?"

“Yes. It was the cognizance of the De Warines. You’ll find traces on several of their tombs if you look closely. It seems to have been a broken chevron with some stars, two above and one below.”

“Stars?” queried Biggles.

“Well, in my ignorance, perhaps, I’ve always regarded them as stars. I don’t really know what they are. The badge of the Landavilles was a rose. That, incidentally, was the original name of the village public house.”

“You mean—the pub was once called The Rose?”

“Yes. That would be in accord with the tradition of associating the name of a tavern with the local feudal lord by depicting his coat of arms. As a rose appears in the arms of the Landavilles we would expect to find a public house called The Rose.”

“Do I take that to mean the pub must have been built in the time of the Landavilles?”

“I presume so. In the first mention we find of the house in the church records its name was The Rose.”

“And a rose was the badge of the House of Lancaster during the Wars of the Roses?”

“Just so.”

“And as Henry, Earl of Richmond, who became Henry VII, was a Lancastrian, I suppose he would sport the Red Rose. And the people who helped to put him on the throne, such as the Landavilles, might also incorporate a rose in their arms.”

“Possibly.”

“And that would be why the pub used to be called The Rose. Strange how these old traditions linger on.”

“Yes, it is all very interesting.”

“What I don’t understand is why the pub changed its name.”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you that,” returned the vicar. “I don’t know when the alteration was made but I think it must have been some time in the seventeenth century, when according to our parish register of births and deaths the name of the innkeeper also changed. Since that time the inn has been known as The Spurs.”

“Why The Spurs?”

The vicar shook his head. “I’m afraid I can’t answer that.”

Biggles smiled. “Anyhow, the tavern must be a genuine bit of Old England.”

“It certainly is that. It has been a hostelry since the church records began, and that was a very long time ago.”

“Thank you, padre,” acknowledged Biggles. “You’ve made our visit extremely interesting. We’ve taken up enough of your time. Now we must be on our way.”

“It has been a pleasure. I rarely have a chance to talk about these things. In the rush and bustle of the modern age even the parishioners seem to have lost

interest in their history, although, to be sure, the names of some of them can be traced back in births, marriages and deaths, in a line as long as the Landavilles.”

The vicar saw them to the door. Biggles put a pound note in the church expenses box, and after thanking the priest for the information he had given he and Bertie walked on to the gate. There he stopped, and sitting on one of the seats took out his cigarette case. “I’m glad we called,” he said, giving Bertie a peculiar smile. “I found that most interesting.”

Bertie took the opposite seat. “Does that mean you picked up a clue?”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it a clue.”

“What would you call it?”

“I don’t know. Let’s say it has given me something to think about.”

“Such as what?”

“You heard what I heard and saw what I saw. Work it out for yourself.”

“To save time, old boy, tell me what you’ve worked out.”

Biggles drew on his cigarette. “I’m still groping for something which I feel is within reach although I can’t quite see it. Just a faint glimmer of daylight. Whether it is really there or an overdose of imagination it’s too early to say. Anyhow, if what I begin to see dimly turns out to be real it won’t be easy to believe; yet the alternative would be one of those fantastic coincidences which occur once in a lifetime to confound us and make us wonder how such things could happen.”

Bertie looked startled. “Don’t say you believe The Curse is working!”

“I do, although not without the assistance of flesh and blood. I’m certainly not prepared to believe in fairy tale stuff. Witches and wizards are extinct and I’m no prince charming with a magic wand. What I’m really saying, in modern standard English, is this: unless I’m right off course the feud between the De Warines and the Landavilles, which started in the days when knights were bold and women had no say in the matter, is still alive. It has never been allowed to die.”

“Even today?”

“Even today.”

“That implies that the De Warines, as well as the Landavilles, are still going strong.”

“Why not? If one family could survive why not the other? However incredible it may seem I can put no other construction on events which we know to be facts. The way Charles Landaville died is an example. We’ve proved that he was murdered. Moreover, although he had no known enemy he expected to be murdered. Leo is no fool. He, too, expects to be murdered—or have his children murdered should there be any. That’s why he came to me. Without any substantial evidence how could he ask for police protection? If he had he would have been advised to see a psychiatrist. The only alternative to my theory is coincidence. Of course, when certain events hook up with each other for no apparent reason we try to explain the mystery by calling it

coincidence, although more often than not, when the thing is examined closely, each event could be a natural consequence of the previous one.”

“Carry on old boy. I’m listening. When did all this first strike you?”

“Looking back I think the possibility has been in my mind all along, for the simple reason I could find no other acceptable explanation. It boils down to this. When the De Warines cursed the Landavilles for pinching their property, as they would regard it—”

“You believe they really did that?” interposed Bertie.

“It’s highly probable. In the Dark Ages, as they are called, cursing one’s enemies was a common practice. People believed in the Powers of Darkness. There were professional spellbinders, potion-mixers, and what have you. The De Warines might well have resorted to this; but if they did, I suspect they had no real faith in mumbo-jumbo and decided to make sure it worked by the application of more practical methods.”

Bertie looked sceptical. “Are you saying that the De Warines have been murdering Landavilles since the fifteenth century? Oh, come off it, old boy. That’s a bit too much to swallow.”

“All right. Give me another explanation and I’ll discard my theory. I admit I find it a bit difficult to digest, myself. But it could happen. As I have already pointed out, one of the facts we have is that the Landaville line, like others in this country, has run unbroken for centuries. All that time the story of The Curse has been handed down from father to son. If that could apply to them why not the De Warines? More than one of our ancient families has a skeleton in the cupboard, although being who they are they don’t talk about it.”

“Was it something that happened today that gave you this idea?” asked Bertie, curiously.

“What happened today threw a spotlight on something I was already beginning to suspect. Not that I’d expect a court to believe it. As I’ve said, I find it hard to believe myself although I have a string of coincidences — we’ll call them that for the moment—to support my contention that what we are up against is cold hard fact, and nothing else.”

“But you’ve no evidence?”

“None that a judge would accept.”

“Then what are you working on?”

Biggles tossed away the stub of his cigarette and lit another. “What shook me today and set the ball rolling was the way the vicar referred to the charges—as I believe they’re called—on the De Warine coat of arms, as *stars*. By the purest chance, as a result of Leo’s description of the crest on the document we found in the chest, we happened to know they are not stars, but mullets, which in heraldry represent the rowels of spurs. They were mullets of five points, remember. Even with holes through the middle they could be taken for stars. In fact, the vicar took them to be stars. On the De Warine shield there were three. Charles’ last words were a warning against three stars. Gould that be coincidence?”

“Possibly.”

“I agree. But I haven’t finished yet.”

“Surely Charles would know the difference between stars and mullets?”

“In the ordinary way, no doubt. But let us not forget he was on the point of death. He’d been shot, and according to Leo he had great difficulty in speaking at all. In those circumstances I don’t think it’s unreasonable to suggest that what he saw, or thought he saw, had some connexion with three stars. Not one or two, mind you, but *three*. That may be a detail but to me it’s significant.”

Bertie pursed his lips but said nothing.

Biggles went on. “The coincidence doesn’t end there, not by a long chalk. The name of the village pub used to be The Rose. That was in the early days of the Landavilles, and what one would expect since they supported the Lancastrian cause and have a rose in their crest. Why was it changed?”

“The vicar told us. The place was taken over by a new man. He was entitled to call the pub by any name he wished.”

“Granted. But a licensee rarely changes the name of his pub, and he would only do that if he had a reason. What does he change the name to? The Spurs. Why did he call the place The Spurs?”

“I suppose he happened to fancy it.”

“If it was no more than a fluke we run into another coincidence. The most important part of a spur is the rowel, the points of which tickle the horse’s ribs and make it go. You’ll notice the pub isn’t called The Spur, which would mean one rowel. No. It’s Spurs, in the plural; which means two at least, perhaps three. And the charges on the De Warine shield are three rowels.”

“But if the fellow wanted to associate himself with the De Warines why not call the place the three rowels and have done with it?”

“The answer might be it would have been a bit too obvious. The Landavilles were in residence at the Hall and might have spotted the implication. The new proprietor wouldn’t want that. So he compromised with what he would have liked to do, and what he dare do. He decided on Spurs, which was near enough. For the same reason he changed his name to Warren, which is good solid English, if that hadn’t already been done.”

Bertie nodded. “I get the drift.”

“And I’ll tell you something else. That crest over the door of the Hall was never a band, or bend, with a rose on it. It looks more to me as if it was a chevron with three mullets, two above and one below.”

“The arms of the De Warines.”

“What else. Who knocked the thing about with a hammer? Leo seems to think it might have been Cromwell’s Ironsides. I don’t. With someone else living in their house the De Warines wouldn’t want their crest over the door. That would have aggravated the sting of losing their property. But that’s only a guess. It isn’t really important. What matters more is another coincidence, if that’s what it really is. Diana, when we had that chat this morning, mentioned

in passing the name of the lady who lives at the pub, the proprietor's sister."

"Julia something."

"Not Julia something. Julia Warren. Today we have learned that the name of the man who runs the pub is Warren, which could be an anglicised version of the French name De Warine, who came from Normandy with the Conqueror."

Bertie stared. "I must say that's a bit odd."

"More than a bit, I'd say. But there's more to come, and this is where my belief in coincidence cracks. You will recall that Diana suspected Julia Warren might have her eye on Leo; and, by thunder, she may be nearer the mark than she imagines, although not for the reason she thought. When Julia went riding it was usually in the direction of the Hall."

"That's right."

"We can believe that because the only time we've seen her that's where she was. You may remember the occasion. It was rather a special one."

Bertie clicked his tongue. "When we heard the raven croak."

"Exactly. Does all this add up to something or doesn't it? As I said at the beginning, have we run into a chain of fantastic coincidences or is there more to it than that?"

"How are you going to find out?"

Biggles threw away his cigarette. "For a start, having given myself a thirst with all this talking I'm going up to the pub to have a drink. Let's waffle along."

CHAPTER IX

AT THE SIGN OF THE SPURS

As the car proceeded slowly up the village street towards The Spurs public house Biggles resumed. "If we are on the right track, and until I can find an alternative solution to what's been going on here I shall assume we are because there's a limit as to how far I'm prepared to trust coincidence, the source of Leo's trouble springs from this pub."

"Are you going to tell Leo what you think?" asked Bertie.

"No. Not yet, anyway. If what I suspect is correct we shall be dealing with a fly bird. At present he must think he's sitting pretty, but one crack of a twig and our job of catching him will be more difficult. The picture as I see it looks something like this. Leo told us that after the Battle of Bosworth Field, Simon De Warine, who then owned the Hall, fled the country. Being a Norman it's practically certain he'd go to France. In those days people on the run usually made for France, where they could relax until the fuss had blown over or their own Party had got back into power. The Yorkists, the side De Warine was on, never did recover the throne."

"So he had to stay in France."

"Yes. Henry VII was a Tudor, and it's likely the De Warines remained in France while the Tudors ruled England. That would fit with what the vicar told us. He said he thought the pub changed its name sometime in the seventeenth century. That's probably right, because the Tudor dynasty had ended and with the Stuarts wearing the crown it would be safe for the De Warines to return to this country. The tradition of how they had lost their property had been handed down so what more likely than they would come here to see what was happening to it, and carry on with The Curse from close quarters. Maybe they had to make a living so they took the pub under the name of Warren, changed its name to The Spurs, and they've lived there ever since. I may be wrong, but that's how I see it. To prove it won't be easy, but unless we can it's going to be too bad for Leo. He's the last of the Landavilles, and it might well be that the people who own the pub are the last of the De Warines. That being so they'd do their best to bump off Leo in case he got married and had descendants. That's what I'm afraid of, and as far as I can see at present there's nothing we can do about it."

"Couldn't we bring Charles' murder home to the Warrens?"

"Not a hope. It's too late. The jury returned a verdict of accidental death and it would be hard to alter that. Even if we got a hearing it would mean exhuming Charles' body, and other complications. Another possibility occurs to me. With Leo out of the way, if the Government didn't want the Hall it would be thrown on the market. The Warrens may have enough money to buy it. It wouldn't need much. No doubt they'd get some satisfaction out of having

it back.”

“Why would they want to live in such a place when they must be snug enough where they are?”

“For the same reason Leo hangs on to it. Call it family pride.”

Biggles brought the car to a stop in front of the tavern.

“What are you going to do here?” asked Bertie.

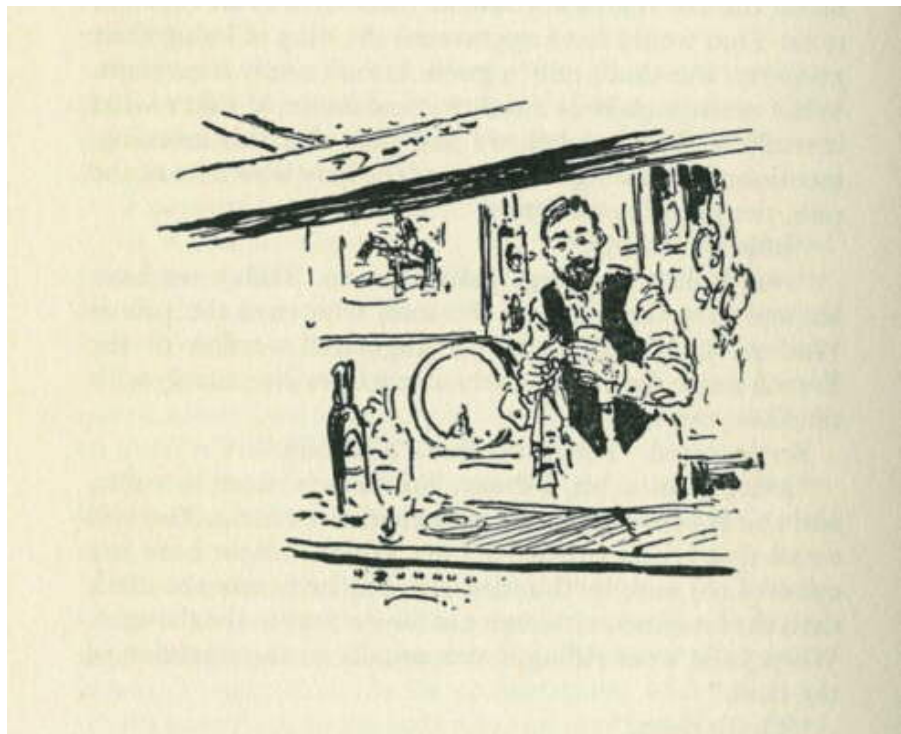
“Have a look at Mr. William Warren, to get an impression of the sort of chap we have to deal with. There’s his name over the door.”

“You won’t ask questions?”

“Not likely. Nothing that any casual traveller wouldn’t ask. He mustn’t know we’re staying with Leo at the Hall, so watch what you’re saying. I notice the horse has gone.”

While he had been speaking Biggles had opened his cigarette case, and taking out all the cigarettes it contained put them in the pocket of the instrument panel. The only explanation he offered, seeing Bertie watching this unusual operation with surprise, was: “That’s to remind me of something.”

They went in and walked up to the bar behind which a dark, good-looking man of about forty, with a black beard trimmed to a point, was polishing glasses. There was no one else there.



“Good morning, gentlemen,” he greeted courteously.

“Two nice light ales, please,” ordered Biggles, looking around admiringly, for the interior of the inn was as fascinating and as well kept as the exterior. There was no doubt about it being the real thing. Old oak beams crossed the low ceiling and high backed benches black with age lined the walls. Everywhere polished brass and pewter gleamed. Some fine old coaching prints hung at intervals. Conspicuous behind the bar, suspended from a hook, was the namesake of the tavern; a pair of ancient swan-necked spurs with ferocious rowels.

“Lovely place you have here, landlord,” complimented Biggles. “Will you take a drink?”

“I’ll have a small whisky, sir, thank you.”

Biggles picked up his glass, and after the customary “Good health” drank some of his beer.

“Good health, sir.” The landlord raised his glass, sipped his drink and stood the glass on the counter.

“How old do you reckon this place is?” inquired Biggles carelessly.

“Nobody seems to know exactly but it’s been here a long time,” was the answer.

“There’s no doubt about that,” agreed Biggles.

Leaning against the bar he took out his cigarette case, opened it as if to take a cigarette, but seeing it empty closed it again.

“Here, try one of mine,” offered the innkeeper, taking a fifty box from under the bar.

“Thanks.” Biggles lit the cigarette, drew on it appreciatively, and then, taking it from his mouth, looked at it. “These are very nice,” he remarked. “What are they?”

“They’re a brand my doctor recommended when I told him I was smoking about fifty a day and found it hard to cut down. They’re a light tobacco and extra mild. Since using them I’ve coughed less than I did.”

“Nestorian,” said Biggles, reading the name on the cigarette. “I must try them some time.”

The conversation continued on general lines for a few minutes when the clip-clop of horses hooves clattered on the hard ground outside. They did not stop in front but went round to the rear of the premises.

“Excuse me,” said the landlord, retiring through a door.

In a flash Biggles had picked up the whisky glass he had left on the bar and emptied the contents into a clean one which he stood on the same spot. The dirty one he wrapped in his handkerchief and slipped it into his pocket. Picking up his beer he stepped away from the bar. All this had taken only a few seconds. A minute later his eyes met Bertie’s when from outside came a curious rasping croak which ended suddenly as if it had been muffled. Then the landlord came back.

“Have you got an aviary outside?” asked Biggles casually.

The landlord smiled. “No. My young sister has a pet jackdaw, that’s all.”

He finished his drink.

Biggles, too, finished his beer and paid for the drinks. "Well, we must be getting along. Good day to you."

"Good day, gentlemen."

Biggles went out to the car and Bertie got in beside him.

As the car moved off Bertie said: "Did that sound to you like a jackdaw?"

"It wasn't a jackdaw," returned Biggles shortly. "It sounded to me more like a raven."

"Well, blow me down. That's what I thought. Could it be they're using a real bird?"

"I don't see why not. If they have a raven there that's about all I want to know. That must have been the landlord's sister who came in on the horse."

"What was the idea of snatching the glass?"

"What do you think! It struck me it might be a good thing to have a record of Mr. William Warren's fingerprints."

"Did you go in with that intention?"

"No such idea crossed my mind, but the opportunity offered and I took it. If the burglar returns to the Hall we may have some finger-prints for comparison. Presently I'll get you to take this glass along to the Yard and get copies made of the prints on it. He took a clean glass for his whisky so any finger-prints on it other than mine must be his. One thing I did plan before I went in was to find out if he smoked cigarettes, and if so what brand. As you may have noticed, that worked all right. It was helpful that he smokes a sort not in common use, and, moreover, cork tipped. I was prepared for that."

"Why?"

"I couldn't read the name on the cigarette end I picked up in the spinney where Charles was murdered but that also happened to have a cork tip. Some of it had peeled off but it had started life with one. That, of course, doesn't prove anything. It could be another coincidence. But it's worth bearing in mind. There's another minor point that adds up. On his own admission he's a heavy smoker, as one would expect of a man who had to smoke while he was waiting to shoot someone."

"Nice work, old boy. As you say, it all fits."

"By the way. You noticed the spurs hanging behind the bar?"

"Of course."

"The name of the pub being The Spurs there might be nothing in that. I was more interested in that big gold signet ring Warren was wearing. That was fine gold, none of this modern alloy stuff. Hand-worked, too, which must mean it's old. There was a crest, or a seal of some sort on the face of it, but I never had a chance to see what it was; and I daren't ask him; that would have been risky."

"What do you think it might have been?"

"The De Warine coat of arms; or at any rate, three mullets. I'd wager there's a twenty-two rifle somewhere in that pub but we'd need a search

warrant to look for it and then we might not find it. I didn't expect to see it when we were in there. No man in his right mind leaves a murder weapon where all the world can see it."

The car went on to the Hall. Leo was sitting in one of the chairs outside. "Just in nice time for lunch," he said, getting up. "Had an interesting morning?"

"Instructive as well as interesting. How about you? Anything happen here?"

Leo hesitated for an instant. "Nothing much."

"Which means that something did happen. Let me see if I can guess what it was. Did you by any chance hear a raven croak?"

Leo stared. "What on earth made you say that?"

Biggles smiled. "I thought one might have come this way."

"You must be clairvoyant. As a matter of fact I did hear a raven."

"What did you do?"

"I went in and got the rifle hoping it would show itself."

"But it didn't."

"No."

"Did you go out to look for it?"

"Just a little way."

"Good thing for you perhaps. I told you to stay indoors when that damn bird was about."

Leo frowned. "Isn't that carrying precaution rather far?"

"It wouldn't be if the bird was also carrying a twenty-two and saw you first," answered Biggles grimly.

"Well, apparently it didn't see me and I didn't see it, so no harm came to either of us. By the way, I've found the key of the chapel. I had a job to turn the lock. No one has been in the place for years. When we've had something to eat I'll show it to you."

"Good. I shall be interested to see it. In these old places one never knows what one is going to find."

Leo laughed. "You won't find a raven's nest. But here's Falkner to say lunch is on. Let's go in."

"I'll just slip up to my room first; I'll be with you in a moment," said Biggles, taking the opportunity to remove from his pocket the glass he had collected at the inn. Wrapping it carefully in a clean handkerchief he put it in his bag. This done he rejoined the others in the dining-room.

During lunch he said to Leo: "I'm sorry to refer to a subject which may be painful to you but there is a question I should have asked you before this. When the post-mortem examination was made on Charles was the bullet that killed him removed from his body?"

"No. If it was I was told nothing about it."

"Why wasn't it removed?"

"I suppose that was thought unnecessary. An X-ray photograph revealed

where it was. It was assumed to be a bullet fired by accident from his own rifle.”

“In view of what we know now that was an oversight on the part of somebody. Had the bullet been removed, and compared with one fired from Charles’ rifle, a ballistic expert would have been able to say the two bullets had not been fired through the same barrel.”

“Proving that Charles had been murdered.”

“Of course.”

Leo made a little grimace. “It’s a bit too late to raise that question now.”

Biggles agreed. “I asked the question in case something else happened and we were hard pushed to find evidence. Forget it.”

With that the subject was dropped.

Lunch finished Leo said: “Let’s go and have a look at the chapel. I must say it’s very decent of you to go to all this trouble. I only hope I’m not wasting your time.”

“And I hope we’re not wasting yours,” returned Biggles, as they rose from the table. “Later, Bertie is going to Scotland Yard for me, but there’s no immediate hurry,” he added.

After leading the way through a succession of gloomy corridors, decorated here and there with antiquated weapons and odd pieces of armour, Leo pulled up before a small but massive door set in a pointed Gothic arch. He produced the big old-fashioned key, turned it with some difficulty and putting a shoulder against the door pushed it open wide enough for them to enter. “Here you are,” he said lightly. “I don’t think you’ll find much here.”

The deep gloom of the little vaulted chamber into which they all walked had the quality of a sepulchre. The stone walls struck chill and dank. It was difficult to see anything; and in fact there was little enough to see after their eyes had become adjusted to the darkness. One or two benches comprised the only furniture, apart from what was obviously a small wooden altar since it was surmounted by a cross. This was under the only window, a small square of stained glass so encrusted with dust and cobwebs that daylight could hardly penetrate it. For this reason it was impossible to see what it represented, if anything.

“Shades of Rufus! What a fug,” breathed Biggles. “Why don’t you open up these places and let in some fresh air?”

“With only one old man about the place? If they were opened up, as you call it, they’d have to be done out once in a while. When Falkner dies I shall be here on my own. What servant, unless he had been born here, would stay five minutes in an old barrack like this? I believe in letting sleeping dust lie. This is all right with me. This place is never used, and probably never will be used.”

“Well, you were right when you said there wasn’t much to see,” went on Biggles. “We should be able to see better if that window wasn’t clogged up with dirt. What’s the subject, anyway?”

"I seem to recall a knight in armour with a halo on his head. Anyway, that's what I made it out to be. As you can see for yourself, that window hasn't been cleaned for years, perhaps hundreds of years. It wasn't quite as bad as that the last time I saw it."

"I wonder why it was allowed to get into such a state?"

"The reason may have been because to get at it one would have to climb up on the altar, and some people might hesitate to do that."

"That may be the answer. Suppose we have a look at it. Gould you find a long-handled broom, a mop, or something of that sort, so that we could brush off the worst of the muck. That should give us enough light to see what we're doing."

"Is it worthwhile going to all that trouble?"

"It might be. One never knows. On a job of this sort one can't afford to skip anything."

"I'll see what I can find," said Leo, without enthusiasm. He went off.

A few minutes later he returned carrying a soft household broom that had lost more than a few of its bristles.

"That'll do," said Biggles, taking it.

Pulling up one of the benches as close as he could get it he stood on it and started scrubbing the window with up and down strokes. Much of the accumulation that made the glass practically opaque was loose and fell away, with the result that the picture formed by the coloured pieces of glass was revealed—enough for their purpose, anyway. It showed a knight in armour with his shield at rest. On the shield was his coat of arms.

"Why," burst out Leo, "that's the same device we saw on that piece of vellum in the chest."

"Does that surprise you?" asked Biggles evenly.

"Shouldn't it surprise me?"

"I would have thought not."

"What are you getting at?"

"You know whose arms they were?"

"No. Who carried them?"

"The De Warines. I'd have thought you'd have known that."

"Well, I didn't know," asserted Leo emphatically. "Why should I know?"

"They were the people here before you."

"But that was 500 years ago! How the devil did you know?"

"I've been going round with my eyes open. You can see this same cognizance in the church. And unless I'm mistaken these were the arms on that shield over your front door before someone battered it with a mace, a battle-axe, or something. What puzzles me is why this window was left here untouched."

"It may have been left on religious grounds. The chapel would be consecrated. The window is right over the altar, and in the days of superstition it might have been thought sacrilege to damage it or take it out."

“You’ve probably hit on the answer. In the Middle Ages this would have been a sanctuary, no doubt, and most people would think twice before damaging anything belonging to God. Anyway, there it is. The De Warines must have put it there and there it has remained. By the time anyone was prepared to do anything about it the thing had been so smothered with dirt that no one knew what it was. Well, there doesn’t seem to be anything else so we might as well get back to the fresh air.”

They went out. Leo locked the door and they walked back to the chairs outside. On the way Leo left them, saying he would put the broom back where he had found it. This gave Biggles an opportunity to speak to Bertie.

“I want you to go to the Yard,” he said quietly. “There are two or three things you can do. First, take that whisky glass with you and bring me back copies of the fingerprints on it. You’ll find the glass in my bag. I also want a finger-print outfit. We may need it. Next, check if Warren holds a firearm certificate, and if so for what weapon. See the Chief and tell him what we’re doing. Make it clear this is a serious matter. Murder has been done, and unless we do something about it we’re likely to have another on our hands. Explain the difficulty. All we can do for the moment is wait and watch, hoping the murderer will take enough rope to hang himself. Suggest it might be a good thing if we had a search warrant for The Spurs public house ready for execution in an emergency. I wouldn’t use it otherwise. He may jib at that but there’s no other way we can get into the house. We wouldn’t get anywhere with Warren by asking questions. Whatever happens you can bet he’ll have a cover story ready, probably an alibi.”

“Okay, old boy. Is there any great urgency about this?”

“No. Get back tonight if you can, otherwise tomorrow will do. It’s a nuisance not being on the phone but you can reckon I shall wait here. I’m not taking my eyes off Leo. He knows he’s in danger, but he still doesn’t realize how dangerous it is. The deuce of it is we can’t do a thing until Warren tries to get him, and that could happen at any time.”

“Righto,” agreed Bertie. “I’ll push off right away and get back as quickly as I can.” He went off.

Biggles sat down to wait for Leo.

CHAPTER X

WARNING FOR DIANA

AFTER Bertie had gone Biggles and Leo sat together by the front door basking in the warm afternoon sunshine.

"Is Bertie coming back tonight?" asked Leo.

"I wouldn't know for sure. He has several little jobs to do for me so if he does come back today he's likely to be late."

"Are these jobs anything to do with me and what you're doing here?"

"Yes." Biggles lit a cigarette and would have said no more, for one thing he wanted to think, and for another he was afraid the conversation might become difficult. He had not yet decided how much to tell Leo, if anything, fearing he might take some action on his own account. On the other hand, to keep him in complete ignorance might endanger his life. But Leo was evidently curious.

He said: "Do I take it from what you've just said that you've picked up a clue?"

"Let's say I have an idea of what is at the bottom of all this."

"Aren't you going to tell me what it is?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I'd rather be more sure of my ground."

"But good heavens, man, I'm not a child. Surely I'm old enough to be trusted?"

"I'm not so sure of that."

"That's a nice thing to say," declared Leo indignantly.

"I'm trying to save your life," answered Biggles shortly. "Or put it like this. I'm trying to prevent you from being killed."

"Then you think that's likely?"

"More than likely."

"Then surely that's all the more reason why you should tell me what you know."

"I don't know very much. What's in my mind is mostly conjecture, and if I told you what that was, being young and impetuous you might fly off at the handle and do something silly. In fact you've already done that."

"How?"

"I told you if you heard a raven while I wasn't here you were to stay indoors. What did you do? You rushed into the house, grabbed the rifle and went out to look for it."

"Naturally. I thought I was helping."

"What you were doing, my lad, was asking to be shot. I have an increasing feeling that this raven stuff is a lure to get the proposed victim within range of

a hidden rifle. Tell me this. I'm not quite clear about it. On the day Charles was killed had he left the house when the raven croaked?"

"I couldn't be sure about that. As I told you, I was in the vegetable garden at the time. It was roughly about five minutes after the croak that I heard the shots."

"It isn't really important," continued Biggles pensively. "There isn't much big timber on the estate except in the spinney where Charles was killed, so wherever he was, knowing that was the most likely place for the bird to be he'd probably walk towards it—and the man who was there waiting for him with the rifle. Don't you make the same mistake. If you hear any croaking stay indoors."

"If someone's so anxious to bump me off he could do it in the house, if it comes to that."

"Oh, no. That isn't the idea at all. You said yourself that the killing is always made to look like an accident. That could hardly happen in the house."

"But with Charles dead, why has this murdering swine waited for so long before setting about me?"

"Because too many accidents in quick succession wouldn't do. The police might get suspicious. We're dealing with a man who has thought this out very carefully, and he's not in such a hurry that he's prepared to take risks to get rid of you."

"But why get rid of me," cried Leo. "What have I done?"

"It isn't anything *you've* done. It's something that was done long before your time."

"When?"

"In 1485, or thereabouts," replied Biggles dispassionately.

"Nearly 500 years ago! But that's preposterous!"

"You may think so, but hate has a long memory where a grievance is concerned, particularly when it affects an entire family. The event is never forgiven or forgotten, being passed from one generation to the next. You needn't dig far in your history book to find examples of that. The clans of the Scottish Highlands still fight over things that happened hundreds of years ago. The Macdonalds have never forgiven the Campbells for the massacre at Glencoe, and that occurred away back in 1692."

Leo stared. "Are you suggesting that the De Warines have never forgiven the Landavilles for taking their property?"

"That," returned Biggles succinctly, "is exactly what I am saying."

"But that's ridiculous! The De Warines must have died out long ago."

"How do you know? The Landavilles haven't died out, have they?"

"After the trouble the De Warines bolted to France."

"That doesn't mean they never came back. Henry, Earl of Richmond, bolted to France before the trouble started, but he came back and lost no time in bumping Richard off the throne."

Leo looked at Biggles sideways. "You seem to have an answer for

everything.”

“Are you complaining? Wasn’t it to find the answers that you asked me to come here?”

“Yes, I suppose it was,” admitted Leo.

“You know it was.”

“All right. What are you going to do about it?”

“For the moment, nothing. There’s nothing I can do until I get the evidence to prove my case.”

“And what do you suggest I do? Sit here and wait to be shot?” argued Leo bitterly. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Yes. You can go and see Diana and ask her to marry you. Get a special licence and very quietly slip away for a month’s honeymoon. I think you said you could be away from Ringlesby for a month.”

Leo blinked, his jaw sagging. “Are you out of your mind?”

“I trust not.”

“But I told you why I couldn’t do that.”

“You mean, why you wouldn’t.”

“Diana wouldn’t be a wife long. She’d be a widow. What’s the big idea, anyhow?”

“Firstly, you’d be safe for a while, and secondly, when the chap who hopes to knock you off heard what had happened he might be tempted to speed things up a bit. I can’t stay here indefinitely, you know; I have other things to do.”

“I won’t do it,” muttered Leo doggedly.

Biggles shrugged. “Please yourself. But do you think you’re being quite fair to Diana?”

“What do you mean?”

“In the expectation of you asking her to marry you she may have declined offers of marriage elsewhere. You can’t keep her dangling on a string for ever.”

“I’ve told her I can’t marry her.”

“But you haven’t told her why.”

“Well—er—not the real reason. I should feel such a fool.”

“Better to feel a fool than feel dead. However, think about it. Here comes Diana now, I think. She’s likely to break a spring, taking the drive at the rate she’s coming.”

The car came to a skidding stop by the chairs. Diana jumped out, looking furious.

“What’s wrong?” asked Leo, as he and Biggles got up to meet her.

“Look at this!” Diana pointed to a little round hole in a side window, one of the front ones. It was on the driver’s side. “I was coming along the road when that happened. The bullet must have missed my head by inches.”

Leo’s face suddenly lost its colour.

“Have you told the police about this?” asked Biggles quickly.

“Not yet. Not that I think they can do anything except warn men who are known to be poachers to be a bit more careful where they’re shooting. If they’re going to start shooting across the road somebody’s likely to be killed.”

“Did you see anyone?” asked Biggles.

“No. Not a soul.”

“Where are you going now?”

“Home. I was on my way home when it happened. I thought I’d look in as I was passing and show you the sort of thing motorists have to put up with nowadays.”

Biggles went to the car, examined the bullet hole and the opposite window. There was a mark on it, but the bullet hadn’t gone through. After searching on the floor for a minute or two he picked up a small flattened piece of lead. He held it out on the palm of his hand for Leo to see. “Fired from a point two-two,” he said. “If I may borrow your car I’ll follow Diana home in case that poacher is still about.”

“I’ll go,” said Leo, curtly.

Biggles looked him in the eyes. “You’ll stay here,” he breathed. “I’ll go.”

Leo looked put out but he did not pursue the argument. “Aren’t you taking a chance? In my car somebody may mistake you for me.”

“I’m paid to take chances.” Biggles turned. “Come on, Diana. I’ll see you home. You go first and I’ll follow closely in Leo’s car. You might bring your car round, Leo.”

“Do you think all this is necessary?” queried Diana. “The same sort of accident is hardly likely to happen twice.”

“I’ll have a look round as we go to see if there’s anyone about. You can show me exactly where it happened. You needn’t stop. Just give a double toot on your horn when you come to the spot. By the way, did you stop when the bullet struck your car?”

“No. I was going rather fast at the time. I heard a sort of smack but it was some seconds before I noticed the hole. Then there seemed to be no point in stopping.”

“You didn’t hear the report of the rifle?”

“No. I wouldn’t expect to with the window wound right up.”

“Which was lucky for you,” murmured Biggles.

At this juncture Leo arrived with the old Bentley. He got out and waved Biggles into the driving seat. Biggles got in. “You stay in the house till I get back,” he told Leo, firmly.

Diana got into her car, slammed the door, and turning set off down the drive with Biggles close behind.

Reaching the main road she turned to the right and went on at a fair pace, Biggles still keeping in close touch and trying to keep an eye on hedges, heath or forest through which they passed. In most places there was enough cover to hide a small army of men. Even on what was supposed to be open, uncultivated land, the weeds grew rank and tall, with young trees, self-sown,

rising from them. It was pleasant enough scenery but he was in no mood to appreciate it. A frown furrowed his forehead and his lips were pressed tight together, for what had happened to Diana had shocked him more than he had revealed. The attack was a development for which he had not been prepared. Leo, yes; but not the girl. It wasn't easy to see the reason for it, unless it was simply to put more pressure on Leo.

Diana had slowed down, and a quick double toot on her horn told him they were at the spot where the bullet had struck the car. He just had time to mark it when Diana accelerated and did not slacken speed again until she stopped at a heavy white gate giving access to a gravel drive which apparently led to her home.

She got out. "Are you coming in?" she asked.

"No thanks," declined Biggles as he also got out. "I'm anxious to get back. But I'll take this opportunity to have a few words with you, if you don't mind."

"You're in a hurry to get back to Leo, aren't you?" said Diana suspiciously.

Biggles had to admit it.

"What's going on between you two?" demanded Diana.

For a moment Biggles hesitated. "Please listen," he said seriously. "I find myself in a difficult position. Circumstances are forcing me to tell you something I would have preferred to leave unsaid. I dislike being an alarmist, but there is something I must tell you for your own good. Will you give me your most solemn word not to mention to anybody—and I mean anybody—what I'm going to say; because if you did that you might cause irreparable harm."

Diana's blue eyes opened wide as they studied Biggles' face. "If that's how you want it. You have my word."

"Good. Now listen carefully. Leo is in serious danger, and I am only telling you that because it now looks as if you're in danger, too. Don't go out more than is absolutely necessary, not even in the car; if you must go out keep away from the Hall. This is a precaution which I hope will only be temporary."

"Do you mean Leo might be—*murdered*?"

"That is exactly what I mean."

"Does he know this?"

"Of course. Until you called today it didn't occur to me that you might be involved; but in view of what happened to you on the road I'm bound to consider it a possibility. It *might* have been an accident but I don't think so."

"You—believe—somebody deliberately shot at me?"

"I do. No doubt you will remember what happened to Leo's brother Charles."

"Of course. He was accidentally—"

"It wasn't an accident. Charles was murdered."

"Good God! Are you sure of this?"

“Quite sure.”

Enlightenment dawned slowly in Diana’s eyes. “Is it because of this danger that Leo hasn’t asked me to marry him?”

“That is the reason. He won’t consider making you an early widow. How he’ll feel now that he knows you’re in danger, too, I can’t imagine. That’s what I want to talk to him about. You do as I tell you. Never forget that one word of this to anyone may cost Leo his life.”

Diana was still staring. Her face had turned slightly pale. “Who *are* you?”

“I’m a detective from Scotland Yard; but I don’t want anyone else to know that. Leo knows, of course. If he knew I’d told you as much as I have he’d be livid, and quite likely ask me to leave the house.”

“You don’t seem to trust him entirely.”

“Not a hundred per cent. Don’t misunderstand me. He wouldn’t willingly let me down. But being who he is he’s proud, he’s fearless, and he’s getting angry. That’s why I daren’t take him completely into my confidence. If I told him all I knew his reaction might well be to take the law into his own hands, and that wouldn’t do. The attack on you might prompt him to do something foolish and we can’t afford to make a mistake. He won’t leave the Hall. Understandably, he’s determined to see the thing through.” A ghost of a smile softened the hard expression on Biggles’ face. He went on: “I took the liberty of asking him to take you away for a month on a quiet honeymoon in some secret place, but he wouldn’t hear of it. It was because he wanted to ask you to marry him that he called me in. He won’t do that until this ugly business is cleared up. He’s that sort of man.”

“Do you know who is behind this murder plot?”

“I think so, although I haven’t told Leo for fear of what he might do. But suspicion isn’t enough. I must have proof before I can act, and I’m hoping to get it without having to produce a dead body. That’s the position, and it’s as much as I dare tell you now.”

“I’m much obliged to you for telling me as much as you have, Mr.—?”

“Detective Inspector Bigglesworth.”

“Thank you, Inspector. Now I know how I stand. I knew there was something holding Leo back. Rest assured that I shan’t breath a word of this to anyone.” Diana held out her hand. “Good-bye for now. You go back and take care of Leo.”

“I shall do my best. Good-bye, and be careful.”

Biggles saw Diana into the drive; then turning the Bentley he set off back down the road over which they had travelled.

He pulled into the side and stopped when he came to the place where the bullet had struck Diana’s car. He had a good look around before he got out, for he was well aware of the risk he was taking by driving the Bentley. But there was not a soul in sight so he went about the business for which he had stopped. He did not seriously expect to find anything, but while there was a remote chance he was prepared to go to trouble to take it. He knew from

which side of the road the bullet had come from the fact that it had gone through the window next to the driving seat.

In the event the task proved easier than he had expected, and for this the rough state of the ground, which at this point was mostly dead bracken, was responsible. There was only one place where it had been trampled down by somebody walking through it, and this was so plain to see that it didn't take him long to find it. There was a little traffic on the road, mostly private cars, and these he ignored. A step at a time with his eyes searching the ground he followed the track, and when it ended behind a shrubby Christmas tree not more than six paces from the side of the road he saw from a small trampled area that someone had stood there for a while. The short end of a cigarette, which a heel had pressed into the soft ground, marked the spot. A cork tip was still intact.

With this in his note case he continued the search on hands and knees, now knowing what he was looking for. It took him some time to find it, and it was with a little smile of satisfaction that he picked up an empty copper case of a calibre twenty-two rifle. He looked at the base. The firing pin had struck the cap dead centre. This was what he had hoped to find when he had asked Diana to mark the spot. He had a good look round to make sure there was nothing more, and then, returning to the car, drove on.

Leo was waiting at the front door. "You've been a long time," he remarked.

"I had a little job to do." returned Biggles.

"What was it?"

"I wanted to make sure that the shot fired at Diana was not an accident. I didn't think for a moment that it was."

"Wasn't it?"

Biggles shook his head. "No, although had she been killed it would have looked like one. She admits she was travelling fast. In the state she would have been in, and the car when it crashed, it's unlikely a small thing like a bullet wound would have been noticed. Who would have looked for one? Who would have suspected anything like that? The man who fired that shot would have been safe enough, and he knew it."

"You're quite certain about this?" Leo looked shaken.

"It's no use trying to fool ourselves, Leo. That shot was deliberate. On the way home I studied the ground carefully. Could there be any possible reason why a poacher, or anyone else in pursuit of game, should fire low across a road which, in broad daylight with traffic about, would prohibit the presence of any wild creature in its right mind? Anyhow, to settle the matter I managed to find this." Biggles took the spent cartridge from his pocket and handed it over. "If you'll look at the cap you'll see it was fired by the same rifle that killed Charles; or one of identical pattern. With our equipment at the Yard I'd wager it could be proved that this cartridge, and the one that killed Charles, were both fired by the same weapon."

Leo stared at the cap for some seconds as if it fascinated him. "My God!" he burst out. "So they're after her, too."

"It looks that way to me."

"But why? Why Diana?"

"One can only guess. Maybe to rattle your nerves. Maybe to hit you where it would hurt most. Can you think of any other reason?"

"The swine! The devil!" grated Leo. He looked up suddenly as if a thought had struck him. "You didn't tell Diana that her life was in danger?"

"As a matter of fact I did."

"You shouldn't have done that."

"That isn't for you to decide," returned Biggles curtly. "Knowing what I know the least I could do was warn her, so that she'll watch her step. How would you feel if you learned that her body had been found on the road, killed in a car accident, and you, knowing her danger, had done nothing about it?"

Leo bit his lip. "You're so right. Dammit, you always are."

"Not always. But I hoped you'd see it that way. Don't worry. Diana has her head screwed on right. What you have to do is keep yours, and not dive off at the deep end before it's time. Now you can get me a drink."

Biggles dropped into the nearest chair and lit a cigarette.

CHAPTER XI

A NEAR MISS

AFTER lunch Biggles and Leo sat outside as usual, Biggles aware of an atmosphere of tension. He could sense Leo's mounting irritation and impatience, and in view of the attack on Diana he could sympathize with him. He was prepared for awkward questions and it wasn't long before they came.

After pacing up and down with his hands in his pockets Leo stopped in front of Biggles, and looking down at him, asked in no uncertain tone of voice: "What do you make of this shooting at Diana?"

Biggles answered: "I've told you my opinion, and since the person responsible hasn't taken me into his confidence it is only an opinion. It may be to prevent you from marrying her; it might be to bring you out into the open so that lie can get a shot at you; or it could simply be to get your nerves frayed. If that's the idea it seems to be succeeding. Sit down and relax."

"It's all very well for you to sit there and talk about relaxing," came back Leo, bluntly. "It's my girl who was shot at. Isn't it time you were doing something about it?"

"I haven't been here long and I haven't been idle. Sit down."

Leo sat down. "Tell me this. Have you any idea at all who's behind this plot?"

"I think I know the nature of the conspiracy. I could possibly name the people."

"People! Do you mean there's more than one?"

"Yes. Almost certainly there are two in it. There could be more."

Leo looked amazed. "Won't you tell me the name of the man who shot at Diana. Or the man you think may have done it?"

"What would you do if I did?"

"I'd shoot the swine."

"That's what I thought. In that case you'd be in the dock, not him."

"If you know the damned villain why don't you arrest him?"

"On what charge?"

"Murder."

"Murder of whom?"

"Charles."

Biggles shook his head. "It's time you knew that to prove a man guilty of murder requires incontestable evidence, and that's something I haven't got—yet. It isn't a question of what *you* believe, or *I* believe. One has to convince a jury, and that's never easy. If there's a shadow of doubt the prisoner gets away with it. A verdict of not guilty means he goes free. If that happened in this case it would only do harm, because we would have exposed our hand to no purpose. No, Leo, it's no use rushing our fences. Surmise isn't enough,

particularly when it rests on something too fantastic for general belief. I'd rather hold my hand until I have something more concrete."

"How long is that likely to take?"

"Not long, I hope."

"And while you're waiting Diana might be murdered."

"Short of asking her to run away and go into hiding I've done all I can to prevent that. I've warned her to be careful."

"So all we can do is sit here and wait until the enemy decides to have another go," rasped Leo bitterly.

"I'm afraid so," rejoined Biggles calmly.

"That's charming," sneered Leo.

"Just have a little patience. Bertie may bring back some information. I can't do more."

"Can't you arrest a man on suspicion?"

"Of murder? Unfortunately, whatever you know and whatever you may think, you can't prove what a man intends to do until he's done it."

"If he was determined to shoot me he could do it as I sit here."

"He won't do that."

"Why not?"

"With me sitting here with you? I'd know it was murder. The technique so far has been to make murder look like an accident. A criminal seldom changes his methods."

"Is he a criminal?"

"Not in the ordinary sense of the word. On the contrary, if he's the man I suspect, at heart he should be a man of culture and integrity."

"Yet he's prepared to kill me."

"In certain circumstances, yes."

"What circumstances?"

"He won't be content simply with shooting you. He'll want you to see him do it so that you'll understand the reason. That's how he killed Charles. Charles saw him. Or at all events he saw *something*, which he tried to explain as three stars. He understood—too late."

"You're making this sound like a mystery story," accused Leo.

"It is."

"But what you've just said doesn't link up with the way Diana was shot at. She didn't see anybody."

"That was different. It wouldn't have meant anything to her if she had."

"I don't get it."

"Maybe it's just as well. There's no point in arguing about it, Leo. We've just got to bide our time. When I've got the evidence I want you'll be told all about it. Then you'll understand." Biggles glanced up at the sky. "I think we'd better be getting inside. It looks as if we're going to have a storm."

This was confirmed by a rumble of distant thunder. A canopy of mist had formed over the landscape blotting out the sun, and a long mass of heavy

cloud was rolling up from the west.

They went in. Soon afterwards the storm broke. For a time the rain was heavy; then it settled down to a persistent drizzle. The atmosphere inside the big house, never gay at the best of times, became depressing; and so the day wore on. After tea Leo wandered away, leaving Biggles alone, which suited him as he had plenty to think about without having to work out evasive answers to Leo's questions. He could understand his frame of mind, and was tempted to tell him what he knew, or at any rate, suspected; but aware of the young man's highly strung temperament he was afraid of what he might do. That he was right in this was demonstrated later that night.

By supper time Bertie hadn't returned, and soon after ten o'clock, more to avoid argument than because he was tired, Biggles decided to go to bed. So taking a candlestick from the hall table to his room he went. But he did not undress at once. He sat on the side of the bed, deep in thought, smoking as he wrestled with his problem. The storm had passed, leaving in its wake scudding clouds, intermittent rain and half a gale of wind which moaned dismally down the wide chimney and round the building, snatching at the ancient leaded panes of Biggles' window which had been left open. Deciding there would be less noise with it shut he walked over intending to close it. Automatically as he reached for the fastener he looked up at the sky where the moon and occasional stars were throwing down a fair amount of light through breaks in the clouds. Then he looked down, quickly to step aside as he saw a shadowy figure glide furtively into the rhododendrons a few yards to the left. It did not emerge.

Thinking he had better warn Leo that they were about to have a visitor he backed away, and opening his handbag slipped the little automatic which he kept for emergency into his pocket. Then, picking up the car torch from the bedside table, and taking the candle, he walked quickly along the corridor to Leo's room. The door was shut. He knocked. There was no answer. Turning the handle he pushed the door open. A lighted candle stood on the dressing-table but Leo was not there.

Startled by this discovery he hurried downstairs and looked quickly into the rooms that were in normal use. Of Leo there was no sign. Deciding not to waste any more time looking for him, leaving the candle on the chest he went on to the front door. It was shut but not locked, which surprised him, for he thought he had convinced Leo of the necessity of locking up at night. Slipping out, leaving the door ajar, he strode on to the bushes. Holding the torch well away from him he switched it on, at the same time saying sharply: "Come out of that, whoever you are."

He took a pace back when out of the bushes stepped Leo, rifle in hand.

Said Leo, tersely: "That was a daft thing to do. I might have shot you."

Biggles drew a deep breath. "If anyone's daft it's you," he said trenchantly. "What lunatic game do you think you're playing?"

"I thought if that damned murderer paid us a visit I'd catch him."

“So you decided to wait here for him.”

“Yes.”

“And if he’d have come?”

“I’d have shot the swine. I believe in an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth —”

“Oh, cut that nonsense,” broke in Biggles sternly. “It’s you who ought to be under arrest. But let’s not stand here arguing. I’m getting wet.” He stalked back into the house, where Leo, apparently unrepentant, joined him.

With the door closed Biggles looked at him reproachfully. “You realize I’m doing my best to help you. You’re doing your best to make things as difficult as possible. If you’re not going to take my advice I’m wasting my time and I might as well go home. It’s no use calling in a doctor if you’re not going to follow his instructions. Is that rifle loaded?”

“Yes.”

“Then unload it.”

Leo obeyed, afterwards laying the rifle and the cartridge on the chest. “I’m sorry,” he said contritely. “I realize now it was dangerous; but how was I to know you’d seen me? I might have shot you.”

“It doesn’t seem to have struck you that I might have shot you. Two people walking about in the dark with loaded weapons is asking for trouble. Let’s say no more about it. You won’t go out again tonight?”

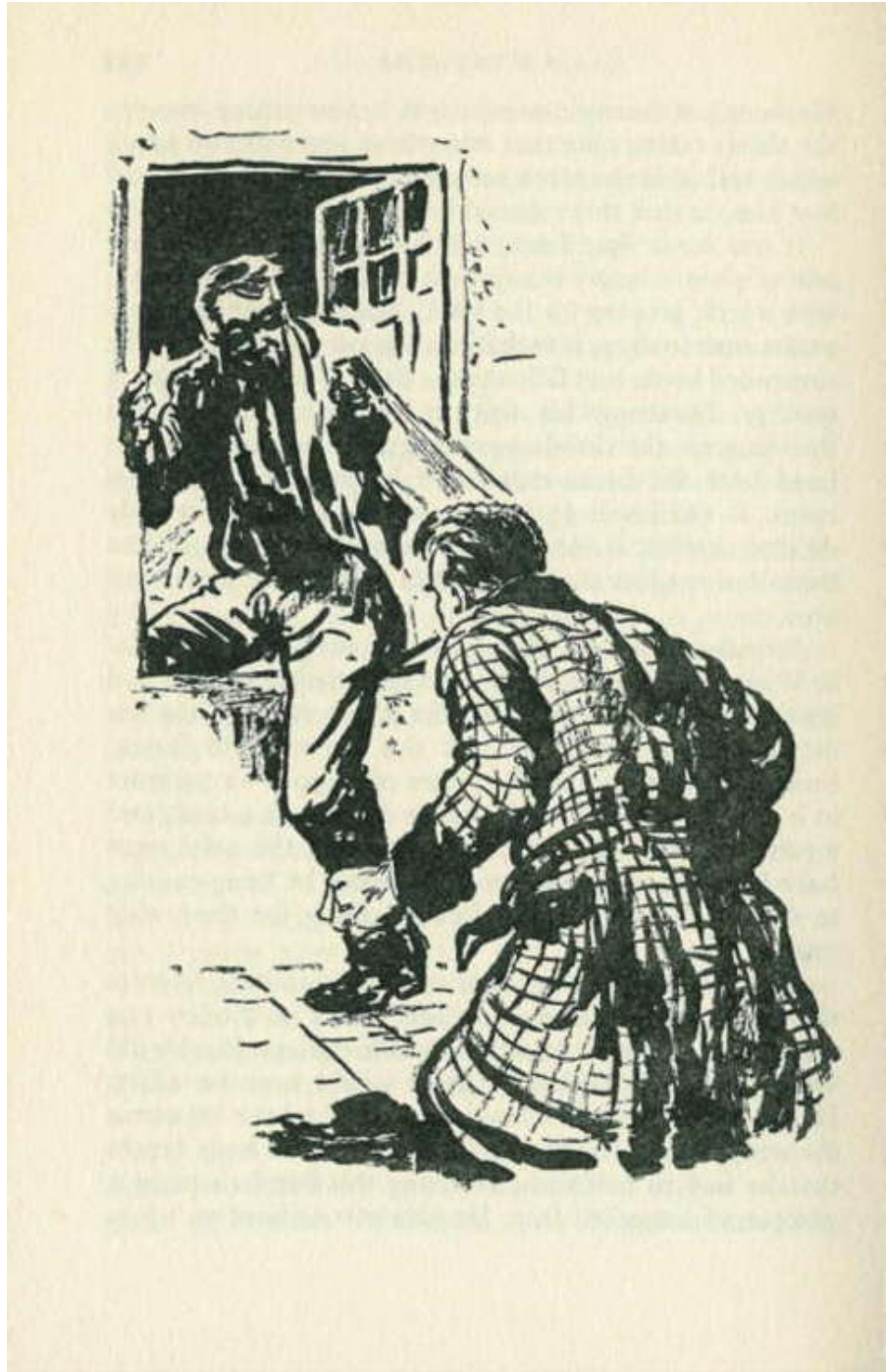
“No.”

“All right. Then I’ll go back to my bed and get some sleep. You lock your door. I shall hear if anyone tries to get in to the chest. Good night again.” Biggles returned to his room and this time went to bed, before getting between the sheets taking care that everything was ready to hand, which included the torch and the dressing-gown Leo had lent him, in case there should be an alarm.

It was some time later, and he was still not properly asleep when a heavy bump near his bed brought him up with a jerk, groping for the torch. Startled as he was from a state near to sleep, it took him a second to realize that the suspended books had fallen to the floor. The trap had been sprung. Thrusting his feet in bedroom slippers and throwing on the dressing-gown, gun in pocket, torch in hand with the beam cast down he made for the chest room. It did occur to him to call Leo, but he quickly decided against it, one reason being that it would lose time, and another that two people make more noise than one.

Actually, it was he who made the noise, and plenty of it. Without making a sound, and not hearing one, he had nearly reached the door of the chest room when his dressing-gown, which he had not bothered to fasten, brushed against one of the pieces of armour—a gauntlet as it transpired later—and it came down with a crash and a rattle on the stone floor. Knowing that the noise must have been heard by anyone in the room he flung caution to the winds and dashing forward flung the door wide open.

A man dressed in black was running across the room to the window. He had nearly reached it. The window was wide open, as a blast of cold air made evident. Biggles did not waste words which he knew would have no effect. He went in pursuit. In a bound the man had one leg across the window sill. To follow with the rest of his body meant that he had to half turn. In doing this Biggles caught a glimpse of a masked face. He also saw an arm go up to point at him, and guessing what this meant he jumped sideways. This may have saved his life, for as he jumped a gun cracked, sending a stream of sparks across the room.



A split second later the body, silhouetted against the faint light of the moonlit window, disappeared. There was a loud crash outside as if the man had fallen into the bushes. Biggles dashed to the window. He just had time to

see the man running across the park before a cloud sailed across the moon throwing everything into utter darkness. The running footsteps receded.

Turning away from the window Biggles raced to the door intending to leave the house by the front entrance. In so doing he came into collision with Leo, who cried: "What the devil's going on?"

Biggles did not stop. "I've lost him," he snapped. "He's away through the window."

Running on he reached the front door and dragged the massive oak portal open to be faced with a wall of darkness, driving rain and a gale of wind. Thunder muttered in the distance. He stopped, impotent, knowing it would be useless to go on in such conditions. And as he stood there staring into the darkness, fuming with frustration, Leo joined him, demanding to be told what had happened. "I heard a shot," he said.

"The trap worked all right but I made a mucker of it going to the room," explained Biggles lugubriously. "My sleeve must have touched one of those pieces of ancient ironmongery with which you chose to decorate your walls. It came down with a crash loud enough to awaken the dead. That did it, of course. By the time I got the door of the chest room open the man was on his way out through the window. I think he fell into the bushes."

"Aren't you going after him?"

"On a night like this? What's the use. There wouldn't be a hope of finding him. Pity, but there it is. Listen!"

Through the inky darkness came the sound of a car being started, and presently a fast moving strip of reflected light showed above the road.

"That settles it," said Biggles. "By the time we could get your car out and on to the road he'll be miles away."

"Sounds like a powerful car," muttered Leo.

"Let's go up to the chest room to see what he was doing," suggested Biggles. "We'd better shut the window, too. It's wide open. Tomorrow, as soon as it's light enough to see I'll have a look outside under the window to see if he dropped anything."

They made their way to the chest room. Leo shut the window and came back to Biggles who was looking at an object on the ground near the chest. Leo would have stooped to pick it up but Biggles stopped him. "Don't touch it," he said sharply. "There may be finger-prints on it; that is, if the fellow wasn't wearing gloves."

"It's a hacksaw," observed Leo.

"Yes. A fine one. Apparently he intended to saw through the padlocks. Yes, you can see where he had started on one. He hadn't got far when I interrupted the proceedings. That tells us he wasn't a professional burglar. Had he been he would have picked the locks."

"What do you suppose he was after?"

"The only thing I can think of is the Charter which is your title to the property."

“He carried a gun?”

“Yes, and he was prepared to use it. The shot must have come pretty close to me. We’ll see where it struck in the morning, in daylight. No use looking now. That seems to be about all we can do for the time being. The chap isn’t likely to come back tonight so we might as well go back to bed.”

They were walking down the corridor when the bell that hung outside the front door clanged.

Leo looked at Biggles, his eyes saucer-ing. “Who the devil can that be at this hour of night?”

“We’d better go and see,” answered Biggles.

Using Biggles’ torch for light they went down to the hall.

Leo opened the door.

Bertie, streaming rain-water, stepped inside. “Sorry to get you up, chaps, but I had a bit of a job getting here. Trees blown down across the roads all over the bally place. I had to go half-way round the country to get here.” Bertie took off a streaming cap and mackintosh and spread them on the chest. “By the way, have you had a visitor?”

“Too true we have,” returned Biggles grimly. “Why do you ask?”

“I saw him at the gate. Or rather, I saw a car parked there.”

“Come in and tell us about it,” requested Biggles.

CHAPTER XII

BIGGLES EXPLAINS

IT was in the great dining-room under the dispassionate eyes of Leo's ancestors that Bertie narrated in detail what had happened to him.

"By the time I'd done all the things you'd asked me to do it was getting rather late, but I thought I might as well come back," he told Biggles. "I reckoned to get here not later than nine o'clock, but I didn't take the storm into account. That in itself slowed me down considerably. At times the rain was so heavy that the windscreen wipers couldn't cope with it. However, having started I thought I might as well keep on. What really held me up were the fallen trees across the road. Once it was the police who had made a diversion that sent me miles off course. I had no sooner got my bearings again than an A.A. man stopped me to say I couldn't get through on the road I was on. The result of all this was I only got here about half an hour ago.

"Half an hour?" put in Biggles. "What have you been doing since?"

"That's what I'm about to tell you, old boy, if you'll give me half a chance. When I got to the drive I turned in and nearly rammed another car that was standing there, just inside, facing the road. The lights had been switched off and naturally I came to the conclusion that it belonged to some bloke who had developed mechanical trouble and had parked there rather than leave the car on the road for somebody to run into."

"That was a reasonable supposition," conceded Biggles. "What did you do?"

"As I couldn't get past I backed out on to the road and walked forward to investigate. For all I knew the chap was still in his car. I hoped he was, because had he been there I would have asked him if he needed any help, reckoning that between us we might have done something. What I really wanted of course was to shift his car so that I could get in. I didn't want to leave our car on the road all night. That would have meant leaving the lights on and running the battery flat."

"Did you leave your lights on when you went to investigate?" asked Biggles.

"I switched off the headlights so as not to dazzle the driver of another car that might be coming up the road. I left her on the sidelights only. That was enough. Then, as I say, I went to the other car. There was no one in it."

"What make of car was it?"

"What with the rain and the pitch darkness it wasn't easy to see; I couldn't swear to it but I think it was a black Mercedes. You see, I hadn't a torch. I'd left it here with you."

"Did you get its number?"

"Yes. I saw that in my headlights when I first turned in. I made a note of it

on the back of the A. A. book before I left our car. I thought the chap might want a witness if he put in an insurance claim. Well, there I was, in a proper jam. It seemed that all I could do was walk the rest of the way to the house. Before doing that I went back to my own car to put it on the verge and lock the doors. While I was doing that I heard the other car start up. I ran forward into the drive to see what was happening and was nearly blinded by the lights as they came on. The fellow must have seen me. He had just started to move. Instead of stopping he put his foot down. I managed to jump clear, but it was a near thing. By the time I'd recovered he was on the road going flat out. It was only then that I realized what he might have been up to. I went after him but I hadn't a hope. By the time I'd got going he'd got too much of a start. I could see the reflection of his headlights on the trees and all I can say is he was going at a lick I didn't feel like risking in those conditions. So I soon gave up and came back. And here I am. That's all."



"I suppose you can guess what's happened here."

"You've had the burglar."

"You've got it in one. I made a mess of things by knocking over a lump of armour and he managed to get clear. You can go back to bed, Leo, if you feel

like it. After all this fuss I don't feel like sleep. I'm too anxious to have the answers to one or two questions. Bertie, where's the stuff you brought back with you?"

"Still in the car."

"You might fetch it, and the A.A. book with the number of that car on it. Here's the torch. Take it."

Bertie went off.

"What are you going to do, Leo?" asked Biggles. "Stay here or go back to bed?"

"If it's all the same to you I'll stay here. Like you, I wouldn't sleep if I went to bed."

"All right. Then you can make yourself useful. Take a clean handkerchief and fetch that tool the burglar left lying by the chest. Don't pick it up by the handle. Use the other end, and try not to brush it against your clothes or anything."

Leo picked up a candle and departed on his errand. He returned at the same moment as Bertie, carrying a police bag and the yellow A.A. Guide. Everything was put on the table and Bertie opened the bag.

Biggles picked up the A.A. book and read aloud the number Bertie had written on it. "WY4782."

"You must have misread it," Leo told Bertie.

"Why?" asked Biggles.

"I know that car. I've often seen it on the road."

"Why should he be mistaken?"

"It belongs to Warren, the man who keeps the pub in the village. He wouldn't be out at this hour and he certainly wouldn't park his car on my drive."

Bertie opened his mouth to speak, but Biggles kicked him under the table and he closed it again.

"No matter," said Biggles. "We shall know in due course who owns the car." He looked at the enlarged photographs of finger-prints Bertie had handed to him.

"Those were on the glass," said Bertie.

"Beautiful," murmured Biggles. "Couldn't be better. Now let's see what sort of luck we have with this." He pulled the hacksaw towards him, and reaching for the finger-print outfit Bertie had opened went to work. It did not take long. Blowing the surplus powder off the handle of the tool he studied the thumb print it had revealed and then compared it with one of the photographic prints. "Perfect," he said softly, pushing the hacksaw to one side and covering it with the handkerchief. "Don't touch that, anybody," he said.

Looking up at Bertie he went on: "Did the chief let you have that warrant?"

"I have it here. He was a bit doubtful about it and told me to ask you to be very careful—not to execute it unless you were absolutely sure of your ground."

"I think we're nearly ready," said Biggles softly. "What about the firearm certificate?"

"No trace."

"No application made?"

"There's no record of one."

Biggles was silent for some seconds, tapping a cigarette pensively on the back of his hand. "We could get him on that as a minor charge if we could be sure of finding a firearm in the house."

"Where else would it be?"

"There's just a chance that it might be here. He used it tonight, against me. He left in a deuce of a hurry and it sounded to me as if he fell. If he did, using both hands to grab the wistaria to break his fall, he might have dropped it. If he did he wouldn't be able to find it because the moon went in and it was as black as pitch. In fact, I know he didn't stop because I heard him running. I wonder... I intended to have a look in the bushes as soon as it got light to see if he did leave anything behind, if only a shred of cloth, or a button. In view of what we have here I feel like having a look right away. One more piece of evidence should just about clinch things." Biggles reached for the torch. "If we find nothing now we'll have another look in daylight." He got up.

The others followed as he made his way out of the front door to the bushes below the window of the chest room. First, he turned the beam of the torch upwards, moving it slowly up the wistaria. "Yes, he fell all right," he said. "Look at that hanging branch, torn clean off the wall. Either it wasn't strong enough to carry his weight or he didn't get a proper grip on it. Let's have a look here." He directed the torch to the ground. "Be careful where you're putting your feet," he requested.

Fortunately the rain had stopped and a little misty moonlight made the task easier; but the rhododendron bush was still dripping with water which streamed off when a branch was touched. Biggles was on his hands and knees feeling the ground, so it was Leo, who was holding the torch, who spotted the revolver, and announced its discovery with a cry of "Look at this!" It had not fallen to the ground but had lodged about three feet up in a tangle of twigs.

"Capital," said Biggles, as he withdrew it carefully by the muzzle. "A twenty-two revolver. This should be about all we need. Anything else can wait. Let's go back indoors."

They returned to the dining-room, where Biggles, having ascertained that only one cartridge had been fired, applied the finger-print test to the butt.

"I didn't know they made a twenty-two revolver," remarked Leo.

"You can buy them at any gunsmith's shop in France," informed Biggles without looking up. He was comparing the prints that had appeared with the others on the table. "Not too clear, but clear enough," he said. "A bit smudged—but the rain would account for that." He looked at Bertie. "Well, now we know where we are."

"You may, but I don't," muttered Leo, tartly. "Isn't it about time you told

me what all this is about ? Why keep me in the dark? What's this talk about a warrant?"

"A search warrant."

"To search who—what?"

"The Spurs public house. I don't think we need keep you in the dark any longer. But don't attempt to do anything on your own account."

"What the devil do you expect to find at The Spurs?" asked Leo, looking astonished.

"For one thing I expected to find a twenty-two calibre firearm held without a certificate. As it happens we already have it here. There should also be a raven which sometimes travels about the countryside in what looks like a large camera case."

"Do you mean a *live* raven?"

"That is my belief."

"Have you seen it?"

"No, but I'm pretty sure I've heard it."

"Do you mean—you've been in The Spurs?"

"I have."

"Why did you go?"

"To have a look at Mr. Warren. I not only saw him but I managed to get his finger-prints. I tried to tell you I hadn't wasted my time."

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid I'm the impatient sort."

"Forget it. Another thing I'd expect to find could be a small shield or similar object emblazoned with the arms of the De Warines, with charges showing three five-pointed mullets which at a glance might be mistaken for three stars. Now do you begin to understand?"

Leo did not answer. He could only stare.

"Did Charles know Warren by sight?" asked Biggles.

"I don't know. If he ever saw him, or if he ever went into the pub, he never mentioned it to me."

"It looks as if either he didn't know Warren, or else on the day he was killed Warren took care not to let his face be seen."

Leo was blinking. "Do you mean this gun belongs to Warren?"

"It did. That's the name he's known by now. But I believe we shall find his real name is De Warine. It's near enough."

Leo, who had been standing up, dropped heavily into a chair. "Let me think—let me think..." he faltered, in a sort of strangled voice. "My brain's spinning."

"I thought the truth would come as a bit of a shock," said Biggles evenly. "That's why I kept you in the dark. I'm sorry, but I decided that was a necessary precaution. Now you know you can start putting two and two together, and work out how it adds up to twenty-two, a twenty-two gun."

Leo swallowed. He still looked shaken. "And all the time it was Warren who wanted to kill me," he blurted. "A man practically on my doorstep."

“Not all the time. He was only carrying on the family tradition. They’ve been in the village nearly as long as you’ve been here. You’d forgotten the past, but they hadn’t. Their chief purpose in life has been to keep The Curse alive. You’re sitting in the seat they regard as theirs.”

“But it doesn’t make sense!”

“Not to you, perhaps, but it does to them.”

“Them?”

“The family, which at present, as far as I know, consists of De Warine and his sister.”

“Is she in this too?”

“I think she must know what’s going on. I don’t see how it can be otherwise. But that’s not to say she agrees with what her brother is doing. She may see the thing from a different angle.”

“What different angle could there be?”

“She may have been against seeing you murdered. She may have had a different plan for recovering the property.”

“How?”

“By marrying you.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

“I admit it does sound a bit far fetched, and I doubt if I’d have thought of it had not Diana put the idea in my head.”

“Diana!” Leo looked thunderstruck.

“She was suspicious of her intentions. That may have been female instinct which spots a rival, or due to the fact that Julia spent a lot of time riding near the Hall where you might see her. There could be something in it. Had Julia got you to marry her she could have become mistress of Ringlesby Hall, and that would have brought The Curse to an end. She may have believed in history repeating itself. I may be romancing, but remember where all this business started.”

“Bosworth.”

“After which the winner, a member of the House of Lancaster, brought the Wars of the Roses to an end by marrying into the enemy camp—Elizabeth of York. As Julia’s ancestors were involved, as were yours, you can bet she knows all about that. I’m only guessing, but she may have thought marriage preferable to murder.”

Leo rested his head in his hands. “This kills me. Why didn’t I think of it?”

“You didn’t dig deeply enough, or far enough back.”

“When did you first get on to it?”

“I think it was Charles’ last words that sowed the first seed. When I saw that coat of arms in your chest it began to grow. When I saw the De Warine cognizance in the church, and heard the parson refer to the mullets as stars, a mistake easily made, it really sprouted. I told you there was a limit as to how far I was prepared to trust coincidence. This was going too far. There were other factors, one leading to the other: the name of the pub; the name of the

owner, and so on. I got this finger-print in the pub. It's Warren's. The same print is on the hacksaw. It's also on the revolver. Warren smokes a brand of cork-tipped cigarettes called Nestorian, and being a heavy smoker he leaves a trail of short ends wherever he goes. Which shows how careless a man too self-confident can get. I picked up the remains of one of those cigarettes in the spinney. Another at the place where Diana was shot at. This, to me, was pretty conclusive."

"Does this mean you're ready to arrest Warren?" asked Leo.

"That will be for my headquarters to decide. We have a tricky problem on our hands."

"Tricky? Why, it's a plain case of murder."

"It may look like that to you, but that doesn't mean you could convince a jury. The big question would be the motive. Could you seriously expect any ordinary man in the street to accept that a sufficient motive for murder was to pay off a score for something that happened nearly 500 years ago? No, of course you couldn't. Anyway, that isn't for me to decide. My next move must be to ring up my chief and ask for instructions. I'll do that from the village when the post office opens. Strictly speaking this isn't really in my line, and the Yard may feel the whole thing should be handed over to the county police."

"But surely you'll search The Spurs now you have a warrant?"

"I shall get orders about that when I've made my report."

"All this will give Warren time to bolt."

"He won't do that. Why should he? He can't have the slightest suspicion that what he has been doing is known to the police. He knows nothing about the evidence I've collected. Besides, he has too much at stake here."

"What about me? This delay will give him another chance to bump me off."

"I don't think you need worry about that. Once he knows the game is up, and he's likely to know that within the next few hours, he won't dare to make another move. How goes the time?" Biggles looked at his watch. "Half past four. Now we've had the thing out on the carpet there's nothing more we can do, so we might as well turn in for two or three hours."

"Are you taking me with you when you go to the village or do you want me to stay here?"

"You can come if you like. We shall use my car. You might like to have a word with Diana while we're at the telephone, maybe make an appointment to meet her somewhere."

"Am I allowed to tell her what you've told me?"

"I shall leave to your discretion how much you tell her. You can trust her to behave sensibly. She's in my confidence to some extent already, as she'll probably admit when she knows how much I've told you."

"Good. I feel a lot better now we've got this grisly business in the open."

"So do I. Now let's get to bed."

CHAPTER XIII

DEATH CALLS A TRUCE

IT was shortly after nine o'clock when the police car left the Hall for Ringlesby village. Leo had accepted Biggles' invitation to go with them, chiefly because it would give him an opportunity to make contact with Diana, if only on the telephone. It looked like being a fair day. The storm had passed, although signs of the gale were plentiful in the shape of windblown leaves and branches.

The car had covered about half the distance to its objective when a group of workmen could be seen ahead handling some tackle, and a notice proclaiming one way traffic caused Biggles to slow down. A uniformed A.A. scout raised a hand and brought the car to a stop. By that time the cause of the hold-up was evident. There had been an accident, and judging from the state of a car upside down in the ditch, a nasty one. The workmen were sawing up a tree that had fallen across the road and dragging away the debris to clear it for traffic that was beginning to pile up. The operations were being watched by a police constable.

Biggles got out and walked up to him, but even before he spoke he had noted the number of the car. It was the Mercedes which according to Leo belonged to Warren the innkeeper. He was shocked but not particularly surprised. Although what had happened was plain enough to see, as he showed the constable his police badge he automatically asked the question "What's happened here?"

The police officer shook his head. "A real bad smash," he said. "Tree across the road and the car must have gone slap into it. Just look at that car. That'll give you an idea of the speed it must have been going. Sixty miles an hour at least the A.A. chap reckons. Can't understand a man in his right mind going at such a rate when he must have known what sort of night it was."

"Do you know who he was?" asked Biggles, to confirm what he supposed.

"Yes. Mr. Warren, of The Spurs public house in the village."

"Was he alone in the car?"

"Yes."

"Was he badly hurt?"

"They tell me he's dead. Died before they could get him to hospital. I've told Warren's sister who kept house for him."

"When did this happen; do you know?"

"It must have been in the early hours. It was the driver of the regular milk collecting lorry who found him. He turned round and came for me. He couldn't get through, of course, what with the car and the tree all mixed up across the road. We're clearing it as fast as we can to open it up."

"Well, some people ask for it," sighed Biggles.

“They certainly do,” agreed the constable.

Biggles went back to his seat and the policeman waved him on. He said not a word until he had covered about a quarter of a mile when he pulled in and stopped tight against the verge. Then he said, simply: “That was Warren’s car. He’s dead.”

There was silence for what must have been nearly half a minute. Then from Bertie: “So now what?”

“As you say, now what?” returned Biggles. “We seem to have solved one problem to be faced with another. What you might call an anti-climax. I haven’t had much time to think about it, but taking everything by and large it may be the best thing that could have happened—for everyone concerned.” Turning in his seat he spoke directly to Leo. “The way Warren died may not give you much satisfaction, but as there’s nothing you can do with a dead man except bury him this will save the police a lot of work and you a lot of ugly publicity. As I see it now Warren closed his own case.”

“What about his sister?”

“She’s been told. The wretched woman will be feeling as if the sky has fallen on her head. There’s nothing much I can do. I’ve no evidence against her. I mean, it would be difficult to prove that she was in full collusion with her brother in what he was doing. In fact, she may not have been.”

“She might still be dangerous... vindictive.”

“I can’t see why she should be. We had nothing to do with what has happened to her brother although of course between ourselves we know why he was driving too fast on such a night. She must realize that. And as far as The Curse is concerned, if her brother was the last of the male line of De Warines what purpose could there be in going on with it? I feel inclined to call on her and have a heart to heart chat. When she knows who I am, and what I know, under the shock she may be prepared to make a confession. If she’ll do that, and give an undertaking never to molest you again, Leo, I’d feel inclined to let things end like that. The Curse is dead, and there’s nothing to be gained by stirring up a lot of muddy water.”

“But is The Curse dead?”

“How can it be otherwise? If there’s only Julia left of the De Warines what can she do? When she knows the police are wise as to what’s been going on she’ll also realize that at the first sign of active hostility they’ll be on her like a ton of bricks. Anyway, for a start I’ll have a word with her to see how she shapes. It isn’t a very nice time to call but the sooner the whole miserable business is cleared up the better for everyone.”

So saying Biggles drove on and did not stop again until he pulled up outside the village post office. “Bertie, you ring the Chief and tell him what has happened. Say I’m going to interview Warren’s sister and that I’ll report back to him as soon as possible. After you’ve done that Leo can have a word with Diana. When you’ve both finished you can walk to The Spurs. You’ll find the car outside. Wait for me there.”

Bertie and Leo got out and Biggles went on to the tavern.

As it was not yet opening time the door was of course closed, but a ring of the bell brought Julia herself to it. Her face was white, but she showed no other sign of emotion. She looked composed. There were no tears.

Biggles said: "I am a police officer. I am sorry to trouble you at a time like this; but it is important, in your interest as well as mine, that we should have a little talk. There are a few questions I think you could answer for me."

"Come in."

Biggles followed her into a comfortably furnished sitting-room.

"Please sit down," she invited. "I will help you as much as I can."

Biggles sat, and when she was settled in a chair facing him he began: "Am I right in thinking your real name is De Warine?"

"You are quite right," she agreed, speaking in a flat voice.

"Thank you," acknowledged Biggles. "That simplifies my task. I have been staying at the Hall, and I may as well tell you right away that I know a good deal about the feud that has gone on between your family and the Landavilles. We needn't go into the details of that because you probably know more about them than I do. Let us come to the present. You know where your brother had been last night when he met with the accident on the way home?"

"Yes."

"Were you in agreement with what he hoped to do? I know what that was."

"No. I tried to dissuade him. It was no use. He always had his own way."

"Had the accident not happened he would today have been arrested on a charge of attempted murder, if not actual murder. I had all the evidence I needed and I have in my pocket a warrant to search this house. As you are being frank with me I hope that will not now be necessary. One of the things I expected to find was a twenty-two calibre firearm, but I already have it. Your brother dropped it in his haste to get away from the Hall when he found me waiting for him."

"So you knew who it was?"

"Yes. I already had his finger-prints. They were on a tool he left behind at the Hall. They are on his revolver. His car was seen in the drive by my assistant. But these matters need not concern you if you will answer this question. Was it you or your brother who killed Charles Landaville?"

She winced at that. "It was my brother."

"Did you have anything to do with it?"

"No. I did my best to prevent it. I could see no object in it, and always I had a feeling that the pursuance of the feud would end in trouble for us."

"Have you ever killed, or helped to kill, anyone?"

"Never."

"What about the raven?"

"So you know about that, too. Yes, we have one, and I'll admit I sometimes carried it. I had to."

"What was the object of this, the origin of the raven?"

“Didn’t Sir Leofric tell you that?”

“He doesn’t know.”

“Then the Landavilles must have forgotten. I’m not sure about the details myself, but as I understand it there was some connexion between ravens and the beheading of a De Warine at the Tower of London for which in some way the Landavilles were responsible. There may have been ravens present at the execution. Anyhow, with us ravens have always been part of the tradition. We were brought up to hate the Landavilles and with my brother it was an obsession. To him they were usurpers. He was not an easy man to live with. He was intensely proud of his lineage. He had a blazer with our arms on the pocket.”

“Was he wearing this when he shot Charles Landaville?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Because that crest must have been the last thing Charles Landaville saw before he died. He mistook the mullets for stars. What was your brother’s object in trying to open the chest in the Hall?”

“He always supposed the original Charter would be there. He thought if he could get it and destroy it the Landavilles would lose their title to the property; in which case, as we hold a deed from William the Conqueror making the De Warines *tenants in capite* we might reclaim it. Henry VII was a usurper and had no right to take it from us.”

“In those days kings could do anything. Now tell me this. What was the idea of shooting at Miss Mortimore?”

Julia frowned, her eyes searching Biggles’ face. “Was she shot at?”

“Yes. Didn’t you know?”

“No. This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“Can you think of any reason why your brother should try to kill her?”

“No. That is...”

“What?”

“Well, a thought comes into my mind. A few days ago when I was trying to persuade my brother to bury his dreadful passion for revenge I did say to him it was a pity the quarrel couldn’t be settled by marriage, as was so often done in days gone by. He pointed out there could be no question of me marrying a Landaville if for no other reason than Sir Leofric was more or less engaged to Miss Mortimore.”

“And you think he might have decided to—er—remove her, to make marriage possible?”

“I can think of no other reason. My brother’s actions were quite unpredictable. The feud was the dominant factor in his life. He lived for nothing else. How do I stand in this matter? You might as well tell me the worst. Nothing matters much to me now. I’m only glad it’s all over.”

Biggles hesitated. “Well, a case might be made against you as an accessory. But we needn’t go into that now. You must understand that at this moment I am only expressing my personal opinion. The final decision will be

taken by a higher authority. But I would like to satisfy myself on this point right away. Will you give me an undertaking never again to interfere with the Landavilles in any way whatsoever?"

"Willingly. I'm glad the whole thing is over."

"Will you write out a statement—not now, later will do—describing briefly to the best of your knowledge what has been going on here? You are under no obligation to do this."

"Why do you want it?"

"As a guarantee of your good faith. The statement would be filed with my report on the case. It is unlikely that it would ever be used."

"Very well. I will do that."

"Thank you. Have you made any plans for the immediate future?"

"No. I haven't had time to think about that."

"Very well. You can let me know in due course what you intend to do. For the moment I must ask you to remain here in case my headquarters wishes to make further inquiries."

"I'm not likely to go away. All I have in the world is here."

"Have you ever met Sir Leofric Landaville?"

"I know him by sight. We've never spoken."

"He's a nice lad. It wouldn't be a bad idea if you apologized to him for what's been going on and told him personally that as far as you're concerned the past is dead and done with."

She looked a little wistful at that. "Do you think he'd be prepared to let bygones be bygones?"

"If he's the sort of man I think he is, yes. A load of unforgiving hatred isn't a nice thing to carry about all your life. I'm willing to speak to him about it. He's outside now."

"He knows the truth about this?"

"I told him early this morning."

"Has he brought a charge against me?"

"Not yet. He's hardly had time to go into that."

"Then I'd be grateful if you would speak to him. I'd rather face him now than have him glare at me every time we passed each other; and if I stay here that's bound to happen."

"Excuse me a moment."

Biggles went out to the car in which Bertie and Leo were waiting. To Leo he said: "I've come in the nature of a peace maker. Miss De Warine has confessed to everything we suspected. Her brother was the root of the mischief. She says she was against it and tried to put an end to the miserable business; and I feel sure she's sincere. If you'll meet her she'd like to apologize and give you her assurance that as far as she is concerned the family feud is dead and buried."

Leo looked at Biggles with doubtful eyes. "Would you advise this?"

"I would. People with a pedigree as long as yours can afford to be

generous. Anybody can, if it comes to that, when the other man is down and out. At this moment the lady has plenty of grief on her plate.”

“What would Diana say about this?”

“When she’s married to you, she, too, could afford to be charitable.”

“Very well,” agreed Leo, although a trifle stiffly.

He got out of the car and Biggles took him through to the sitting-room where the sole surviving member of the De Warine family stood waiting.

Biggles introduced them as if the meeting was nothing out of the ordinary. All he said was: “This is something that should have been done a long time ago.”

Julia said, simply: “I’m sorry. I can’t say more now, except that for me it’s all over.”

“I’m sorry, too,” returned Leo.

“Shake hands on it so that I can bear witness to that,” requested Biggles.

“In future you should be able to look each other in the face when you meet, and for people who have been entitled to wear armorial bearings for as long as you have that is how it should be. That’s enough to go on with. We needn’t prolong what must be an awkward moment for both of you.”

Taking Leo by the arm Biggles led him back to the car. They got in without a word. The car went on.

After a little while Biggles said: “Have you arranged to meet Diana?”

“She’s coming to the house.”

“That’s fine,” declared Biggles cheerfully. “When are you going to get married?”

“That’s what we’re going to talk about.”

“In that case you won’t need any more advice from me. We’ll press on back to Scotland Yard where I shall probably get the cane for exceeding my official duties.”

Biggles drove on, whistling softly.



THE END